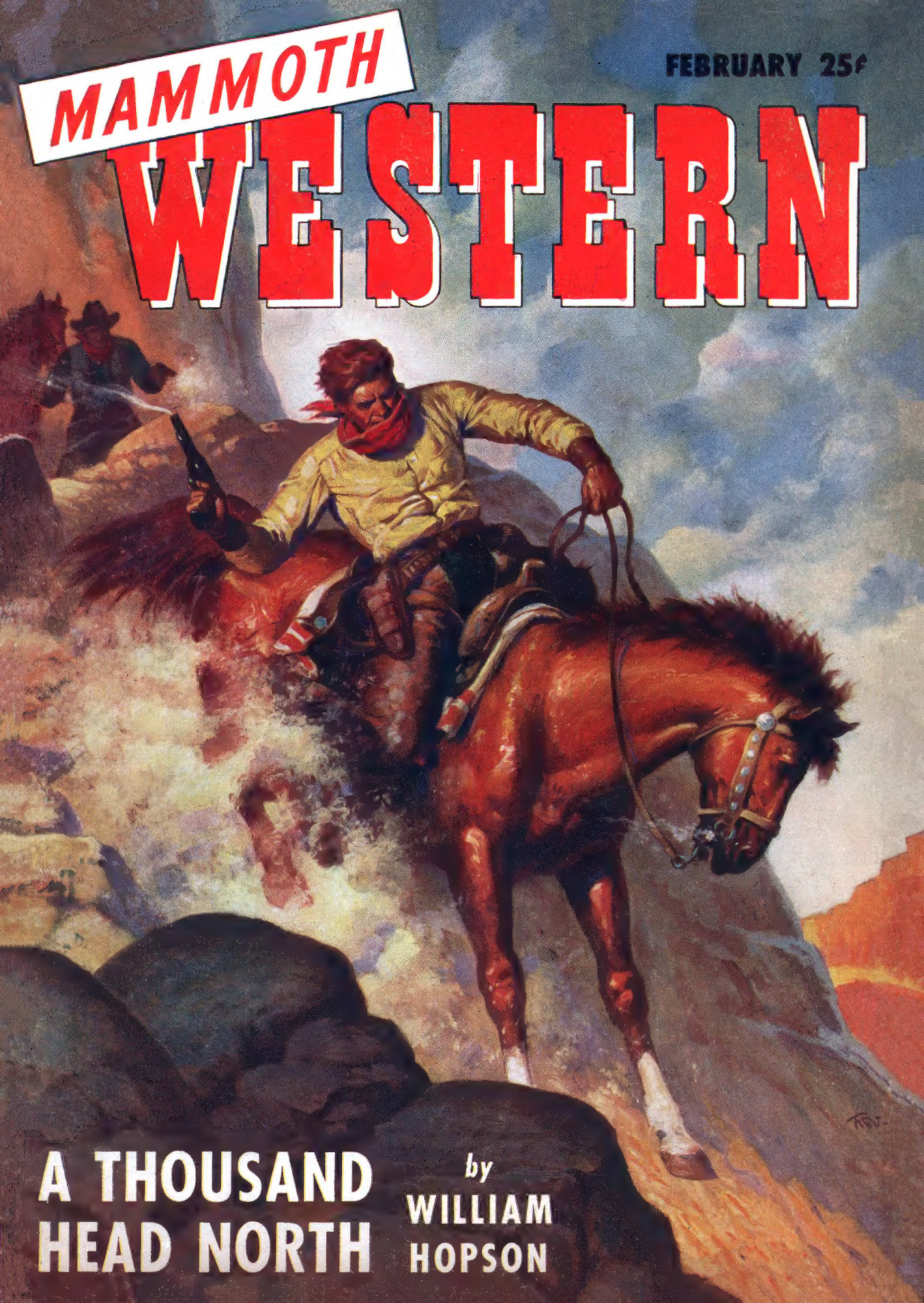
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by WILLIAM HOPSON

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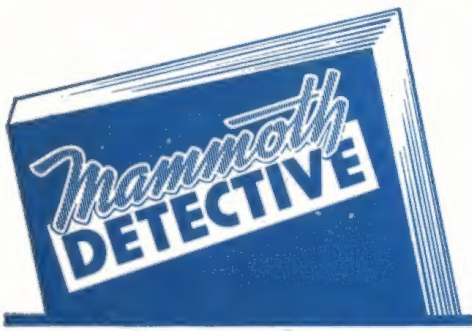

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Sometimes nothing is more important than a steer; unless it's a thousand of 'em due to go to market.

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One way to make a man see the truth is to tell him a lie. In that case it's a little white lie . . .

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Front cover painting by Robert Gibson Jones, illustrating a scene from "A Thousand Head North"

MAMMOTH WESTERN FEBRUARY 1947

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Volume 3 Number 1

IT SURE has been a tough peace, hasn't it? You readers of MAMMOTH WESTERN would understand that statement if you were to spend a week in our office watching us put out (or try to put out) the magazine. During the war there were vexing shortages and lack of manpower. We used to beef about this and beef about that. Now there's no beef, except that we moan about the "good old days" when there was a war on and you could get a magazine out on schedule (or get a magazine out, period). In polite language, it's called "mechanical difficulties." Anything we call it, you can take our word for it that this issue was put out under it—and we mean way under!

ALL of which is just by way of contrast to the swell things we've got to say about the contents of this issue which we almost didn't get out. Take for instance the novel featured on the cover by that swell Robert Gibson Jones cover (how that guy can paint!). "A Thousand Head North" is by William Hopson, and by now you know what that means. Bill is one of the best western writers we know, and he's right out there in the middle of things, constantly writing his stories where they actually take place—so you can depend on it, he knows what he's talking about. This story isn't like the general run of westerns. You'll find yourself in for a new type of thrill, and you'll find that for real entertainment, you'll have to read a good many westerns in the future to match it—unless it's the next issue of MAMMOTH WESTERN, which will have top-notch stories too!

ONCE in a while we like to go off trail, sort of hit up into the mountains and do a little prospecting—in stories. Earl Jackson sent a yarn in to us the other day that did just that, we thought, and we decided to give it to you. It's called "Joe Smith Makes a Strike" and it's about an old western prospector during the war who gets a little thirsty out in the desert and has his eyes play tricks on him—or was it his eyes? Anyway, he finds himself prospecting for gold in a place you'd *expect* to find it (being as how the streets are reputed to be paved with it!). You're in for a chuckle, and something different. But that's what you seem to like about MAMMOTH WESTERN; you get nice little surprises now and then in an off-trail yarn.

SPEAKING of more modern western stories, how about Berkeley Livingston (who once *flew* over the west) and his "The Magnificent Caballero?" We think you'll like this one. It has a lot of real people in it, doing pretty real things. And it could happen—in the west!

"ACES AGAINST BULLETS" is by Leonard Finley Hilts, and we think the lad has done something here! It's a fast-moving yarn that'll intrigue you from the start. When a man starts out with the promise he makes in this story, you get all hot and bothered as to how he's going to make good on his promise. It's like promising you'll build the Empire State Building tomorrow. How you gonna do it, bud? Read this story and when the hero makes his promise, just try and put the story down! How IS he gonna do it?

TOM W. BLACKBURN is too familiar a name to you readers of westerns (and adventure and mystery and what have you!) to require an introduction, so we'll just talk about the story he wrote for this issue. It's called "Mission at Red Rock" and you might say it's off-trail too. It's about a Baptist minister who comes to a mighty tough section of the country and "stoops" to subterfuge to get his church built and as an incidental, make a lot of people better people to live with and a lot of people a lot happier. He even "cooks up" a wedding for the first service in the new church, and picks the country's two most feudin' people as victims. You'll like this yarn about a western Parson who uses words like bullets, and saves lives rather than waste them. He's got a "six-gun" brain, but it never seems necessary to re-load it. It just keeps going off in all directions and a lot of "hate" bites the dust and dies.

FOR fact articles this month, we have one by Dwight V. Swain called "Triggerman from Texas" which should interest you; and another by Clark South called "Ringo: Tombstone Terror" which "tells all" about one of the characters of the west who has become part of our national history. You'll find other fact articles scattered through the book which will make fine reading during that morning bus ride, or what have you, to work.

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He knelt down and examined his gruesome find

A THOUSAND HEAD NORTH

By WILLIAM HOPSON

When a woman decides to marry a man, it doesn't seem to make much difference how many cows — or murders — are credited to that man!

ALL that day Buck King, the trail boss, and his punchers had pushed the herd steadily northward over the flat Texas terrain. They were big steers, prime four year olds, and of part Mexican stock. Some had been bought across the Rio Grande river, their tough dark hides still sore from the slash road brand that had been drawn through Victoriano Yabarra's original mark. Old Jake Kromper, owner of the herd, had driven them the forty miles from the purchase grounds and thrown them in with the rest of the trail herd King was making up.

Of the thousand head now plodding thirstily up the wide, dry swale, about six hundred had come from Kromper's own ranch stuff. The others bore, in addition to the Yabarra brand, J4 and Double Rocking Chair marks; these last named bought from spreads down near the home ranch west of Alamonda. In the money belt around the trail boss's waist were the bills of sale and ownership covering the four brands, necessary for the critical eyes of the brand inspector at Porterville before stock could be loaded into cattle cars.

Such papers sometimes made the shipping of stolen cattle a lot harder than the rustling of them.

It had taken a week to road brand them all, overhaul "Mutton Chop" Beasley's chuckwagon, and round up a remuda with a string of horses for each of the nine punchers. Cortez, the Mexican day wrangler, had a few of his own while Sonuvagun, a Cherokee Indian, who handled the remuda nights, used his two paint ponies.

Taking it by and large, it was a pretty solid outfit and the taciturn King, middle-aged and a good cowman, was inordinately pleased at their slow but steady progress through almost four hundred miles of drought hit country. Feed hadn't been too plentiful and water was scarce, but Porterville, the new railroad shipping point, was within another day's drive. The steers were holding up pretty well, a little lean but still strong; and King grudgingly admitted to himself that Red Bates, cub of the outfit and the only man of them who had previously been over the route, had brought the herd straight through.

The trail boss looked back over the herd, strung out for more than a mile; plodding, backs moving, horns knocking. A pall of yellow dust lifted from four thousand split hooves and seemed to hover motionless above them in the stillness of the mid-afternoon air. Far behind came Big Joe Drusilla and another rider, bringing up the drag; the sick, the weak, the lame, including one big black steer suffering from a bad goring in a fight with another steer two days back. But Big Joe had roped the animal, hog-tied it, and filled the

wound with a pungent salve to keep out blow flies.

Not a critter had been lost.

Back along the herd a rider swung out, loped off toward the remuda a quarter of a mile away, and presently came back astride a fresh mount out of his string. The herd had been pushed hard that last day to make Gyp Sinks by nightfall and was using up horses pretty fast. But Buck King was not, however, worried about horses or the condition of the steers. They were tired and dusty, a little spooky because of thirst, but would come through.

His worry lay ahead.

The Old Man had, days ago, written to the rail agent in Porterville, asking for forty or forty-two cattle cars. It was to be assumed that they would be waiting on the big siding Red Bates had said was built a half mile north of town. But King was a man who didn't believe in taking chances. He'd sent Bert Donnell on ahead to insure delivery.

Donnell should have been back by now and Donnell had not as yet put in appearance. But then, King thought, Porterville was a raw new rail town and a trail boss should have known what would happen. Bert was a good man but he'd probably got himself full of red-eye and ended up in the local jail.

King gigged his horse into a lope and headed for the leaders where Red Bates and cadaverous Hank Watson were riding point.

HE PULLED up alongside of Bates. The cub ambled his horse along, one leather chapped leg thrown around the saddle horn. Despite dust and fatigue, and unmindful of the glaring looks cast at him by Hank's baleful eyes over the bandana covering his hook nose, he was letting go a full lunged and slightly off key rendition about a beautiful *senorita* he had never set eyes upon except in youthful imagination.

Music and *Senorita* disappeared into the haze above the herd as the trail boss reined in close.

"How many more miles to those sinks, Red?" he demanded.

"About three or four," Red Bates replied, glancing at the sun, his booted foot finding the stirrup again. "We ought to make it sometime before dark."

"You real sure about the water?"

Bates twisted his blocky young body to change seat in the saddle. "Nope," he said, grinning cheerfully. "Plenty when I came by early this last spring. Of course, I didn't have time to stop and see how deep it was, seeing as how I was sloping by pretty fast. That town marshal and his sixteen friends—"

Hank Watson's bandana snapped down off his eagle nose, revealing a handlebar mustache of longhorn spread. "How many?" he snorted.

"—were still chasing me."

"How many?" roared Hank again.

"Well, maybe only about six," Bates admitted unabashed. "Leastwise it looked like six. I was too busy to do much countin'. Le's see—there was Tad Brown, the marshal, Mike Kelly, his friend, a cheap cow buyer named Gabe Summers—"

"I'm worried about those cars and Donnell," the trail boss cut in impatiently. He removed his Stetson, ran a sleeve over his thinning, sweat beaded head, and replaced the hat. "Ace Sampson just got in a little while ago from the post office at Cedar Flats, where the agent in Porterville was to write his reply. No word about them cattle cars."

"He's worried about *cars*," snorted

the youthful Bates disgustedly to Hank. "Right when I'm in the middle of a bee-utiful song he lopes up on that glue factory of hisn and says as how he wants some cars. It was a pretty song too," he complained. "I was making it up as I went along."

"How sad," moaned Hank Watson with unconcealed sarcasm. "Why, I reckon the Texas cow country just won't ever recover from sech a calamity."

"What about fences?" snapped King. "Any fences between here and the gyp hole?"

"Wasn't none when I went by. But then I wasn't exactly looking for fences. I was huntin' brush patches and gullies. That two-bit marshal and his cronies—"

King wasn't thinking about the marshal. He didn't give a damn about the cub's brush with the law in Porterville. If those sinks were fenced in there would be no more water nearby that he had heard of. And those steers couldn't hold up without it until they were loaded and hauled to the first watering place on the railroad taking them east. Three days. The trail boss frowned.

Hank Watson seemed to read his uneasy thoughts.

"I doubt if the water's fenced in, Buck," he ventured. "Mutton Chop went on ahead with the wagon after dinner, you know. If we couldn't get at that water, he'd have come bouncing back here hell for leather with his four horse outfit to let us know."

"Probably. But I still want to know."

"It was still a beautiful song," Bates said dolefully. "And now I got out of the mood. I've forgot the tune. Let's see, it went like—"

"Never mind how it went like," snapped King. "You do bad enough yowling love sick tunes riding herd at night. Go over to the remuda and rope yourself a fresh horse, Red. Hit the breeze for the sinks and see about that water. If you're not back I'll know it's all right. So you go on in to Porterville and find out from the agent if those cars are there or will be there. If Donnell is in jail, let him stay there. Tell the agent we're holding the herd here at the sink for a couple of days to let 'em feed up and rest while the brand inspector looks 'em over and checks the papers I'm carrying."

"But I don't like Porterville," Red Bates complained. "They don't like me either. Whadda you think brought me south so fast last spring to start punching yore six head of busted down cows? That town marshal, Tad Brown. He's the most narrow-minded, no good, plain ornery cuss I ever saw. All I did was rope him and drag him through a mud puddle when he tried to chase me outa town for sparking that big bosomed biscuit shooter in the local cafe. How did I know he was sweet on her, now I ask you, Buck? Is it my fault I'm so han'some?" he defended.

BUCK KING looked at the brash youngster's impudently freckled face, finding it hard to repress a smile. Ever since Red Bates had hit the Circle K outfit early that spring, the place hadn't been the same. He stole pie from Mutton Chop Beasley on nocturnal frays while that bewhiskered and bellicose gentleman snored in his bunk not far from the kitchen stove, put sand burrs in boots, and gleefully raided Pug Carson's warbag for clean shirts, Pug unfortunately wearing Bates' exact size. When Ace Sampson reciprocated for the sand burrs by placing a live six foot bull snake in the culprit's bunk, Bates slipped out to Ace's saddled horse and cut the girth almost in two. He stood and watched in bland faced innocence as the unfor-

tunate puncher's bronk spilled both rider and saddle through the air into the doorway of the blacksmith shop and then triumphantly bucked off into the chicken yard where the Old Man was clucking paternally to his prize chickens.

Ace and Red Bates had had a beautiful fight right there, and only the fact that the red head was a top hand of the first order, plus roars of laughter from the other hands, prevented the apoplectic Old Man from firing him on the spot.

"He was a kind of homely cuss too, that's what made it so bad," Bates added to King, anent the affair of the love sick and very jealous marshal.

"Yas," King said sarcastically. "Well, that's just too bad. You oughta thought about that before you started rushing that woman. It'd serve you right if he threw you right in with Donnell. Hurry it up, Red. Get rolling."

"All right," groaned Red Bates sadly, shaking his head. "But if I don't get back it'll be all yore fault for being so crool to a unhappy cow puncher whose heart is all busted up because—"

"If you don't get back," cut in King succinctly, "you'll get the pants fired off you. And while you're there, hunt up Harmon, that brand inspector friend of yourn, and tell him we're here."

"He ain't no friend of mine—not after taking six dollars and forty cents and a silver ring off me in a poker game one night."

"Get rolling and hurry back."

"I'll hurry back, all right. If you sees a cloud of dust streaking across the prairie, it won't be a Texas sandstorm. It'll be me headin' south again. But I'll stop by long enough to collect the three weeks wages you owes me. Maybe you could pay it to me now," he suggested brightly.

King let go a snort. "If I paid you three weeks wages and you hit town after the days we've been on this drive, you wouldn't come back for three weeks. I know you cow punchers too well."

Bates' freckled face fell, then suddenly lost its gloominess. His hopes weren't quite blasted. "Maybe she ain't married yet," he said to Hank, hopefully as only youth can be hopeful. "And he certainly was a homely cuss, that star packer. Had a snout on him as broad as a hawg."

CHAPTER II

HE WHEELED and loped away, twisting in the saddle long enough to thumb his nose at Ace Sampson as the latter, not long back from the trip to Cedar Flats, rode by on a fresh horse. Sampson answered in kind, wriggling his fingers suggestively, and then disappeared into the dust back near the center of the herd, bandanna up over his nose.

Cortez, the day wrangler, loafing along back of his grazing charges, saw Bates coming and rode over from back of the remuda as Bates reined up and took down his coiled lariat. He shook out a loop, eyes scanning the horses.

"Try that roan outa your string, Red," the Mexican grinned, hoping to see some fun and a little sweet revenge. The roan was notorious on the ranch for heaving its barrel while the cinch was being drawn tight. After which, at the appropriate moment, it started to buck, thereby dumping its unsuspecting rider as the saddle slipped.

"He's a pretty good horse, I theenk," added the Senor Cortez.

"Yah?" jeered the red headed Mr. Bates. "Then why don't *you* ride him?"

"Oh, no," the wrangler said hastily. "He's too good a horse for a *pobre*

wrangler like me. He fits you moch better."

"He shall fit me moch better right now," Bates said, gigging forward, loop built and resting over his right shoulder.

He rode into the remuda, now beginning to bunch warily, his eyes watching a big clean limbed bay twenty feet off to one side, and Cortez's swarthy face began to register disappointment. The Mexican was still remembering the night he came home from a somewhat *tequila* blurred visit with friends down across the Rio Grande and woke up in his shack with a hangover the next morning to find his head pillowed on the neck of a half grown milk pen calf that lay hog-tied in his bed.

The wary bay had begun to sidle off; and thus the roan, caught off guard, ducked too late. The rope sang out, settled neatly over its dodging head, and Bates rode out of the remuda with the digusted animal snubbed up close to the horn of his saddle. He swung down from the claybank he had been riding, unloosed cinch, dumped saddle and sweat dampened blanket on the ground long enough to bridle the roan, and then heaved his gear up onto the sidling animal's back.

He hauled up hard on the cinch and then paused, eyeing the leather.

The buckle was all the way out to the last notch, and Cortez' muffled snicker came plainly.

"Funny, huh?" muttered Bates, dropping the stirrup down off the saddle horn and inserting a toe, preparatory to swinging up.

He put his weight on the stirrup . . . and for the second time in three minutes the roan found itself outwitted again. The "bloat" had gone out of its barrel with Bates' weight, the girth hanging loose underneath.

Red Bates grinned and hauled up hard on the leather. It went up about five notches, good and snug this time.

"There, blast you," he jeered at both the roan and Cortez. "Now watch me take it out of your hide, you wall-eyed, bat-eared son of a burro. I wouldn't even sell you to Tad Brown, that marshal in Porterville who loves me so much."

He swung up and, with Cortez' disappointed gaze following him, set off at a lope.

"Hey, Red!" bawled the voice of the wrangler. "You ever see any Mexican senoritas in this town of Porterville?"

"Not a one, dearie, not a single one," came floating cheerfully back, and the flat land gradually absorbed the muffled beat of hoofs.

AHEAD of the roan the swale widened to more than a mile with a few washes and rain cut ditches showing in the dry earth. But, as the herd fell behind, the mesquite clumps grew thicker and grass looked much better. A flock of quail, top-knotted bob whites, burred up out of a cactus clump and droned off, bullet like, with Bates' eyes following. He made a mental note to get some fine shot for Mutton Chop's double barrel muzzle loader shotgun while in town.

A small arroyo opened up and the roan dropped down the dry bank, scattering clods. Gravel rang out underneath its unshod hoofs and presently the ground began to show damp. The sinks were about two miles ahead.

By now the mesquites had thickened until they were a forest and Bates, grinning, kept to their green cover, his eyes going far ahead for sight of the chuckwagon. If Mutton Chop had time he'd be taking a brief afternoon nap, and there just might be a stray

pie in the chuck box.

The wet gravel changed to mud as the pie hungry puncher advanced and he swung the roan up out of the arroyo to higher ground where the grass was now luxuriantly thick among the mesquites. Thorny limbs brushed at his leather batwing chaps as he threaded the roan through and finally spotted the chuck wagon. White canvas glinted in the sun and Bates' face fell as he noted that the sagacious cook had chosen a grub site a half mile east of the sinks on a slight rise. It was close enough for a plentiful supply of firewood but not close enough for a sneak raid.

"Oh well," grinned the puncher to himself. "I was getting tired of the old walrus's grub anyhow. I'll get me some good chuck in town. And maybe she *ain't* married yet."

He covered the distance at a jog trot and approached the wagon at a walk, easing the roan to a halt thirty feet away and getting down cautiously. There was a fire going with a big pot of beans cooking, and off to one side the four freshly watered chuckwagon horses grazed in the lush grass, front feet hobbled.

A familiar snore came from beneath the wagon, the red mutton chop whiskers rising and falling as Red Bates began a stealthy approach upon the chuck box.

There wasn't any pie, but there was a large square pan containing a two inch thick cake with a generous sprinkling of canned peaches on top. Bates chose a knife, laid off a square, decided it wasn't big enough, and cut. He stuck the slab into his mouth and began backing away once more.

Ten feet from the wagon, fist still gripping his loot, one of his spurs struck a stick of mesquite firewood with a rattling sound.

Red Bates wheeled and legged it for the roan, hitting the saddle fast as a familiar roar came from beneath the wagon. Mutton Chop Beasley came out on all fours, whiskers bristling, looking like a big walrus climbing out of a pool. He got to his feet and lumbered toward the now circling roan.

"Drop that cake, you paint colored coyote!" he yelled, shaking a big fist covered with golden hair and dime sized freckles. "I cooked that for supper and there ain't no coyote of a busted down cow chaser goin' to get away with it."

Bates spurred the roan in a sidling circle that kept its rider safely out of range while he crammed the fast disappearing contents of a chubby fist into his mouth. He gulped and a grin struggled through.

"It's my share, ain't it?" he jeered at the angry cook.

"Not unless you weigh twice as much as I do."

"But I'm young and growing. You wouldn't want me to grow up all stunted because I didn't get enough cake to eat—"

"I'll stunt your growth plenty if I ever get my hands on that roan's bridle."

"Well, I ain't taking any chances," snickered Bates. "First come, first served, I say. And there ain't nothing you can do about it either, you dough mixing excuse of a grub rustler."

He crammed in the last of the cake and Mutton Chop Beasley shook a hairy fist again. "Oh, there ain't, ain't there?" he yelled. "I've been living and hoping for this day, Reddie."

He made for the chuckwagon, a speckled, hirsute arm disappearing over the sideboards. The arm came up with the double-barrelled muzzle loading shotgun.

"This here lead sprayer," Mutton

Chop said ominously, "is loaded with chopped up bacon rinds and red beans for that brindle steer as decided it didn't want to eat anything but chuck box leftovers and has been pestering me nights. At fifty yards I can put blisters all over that excuse of a hoss yo're riding. Said blisters I also can put on that excuse of a cow wrastler who's riding it. Now just start off and watch me burn the both of you with one barrel each. About fifty yards'll be the best range, I think. Get goin'!"

BATES gave off a convulsive gasp and the last of the cake crumbs flew.. His cherubic face took on a look of downright alarm. Where but a few moments before he had been intent on keeping out of the cook's reach, he now displayed a sudden desire practically to embrace the other.

"Aw, now wait a minute, cookie," he pleaded, staring down the twin tunnels back of which was Mutton Chop Beasley's triumphant face.

"That's close enough. Get goin'!"

"Tell you what I'll do: you forget about that cake and put down that blunderbus and let me get at my warbag in the wagon and I'll bring you back something nice from town, same which I'm heading for right now."

"What?"

"In a bottle."

Mutton Chop half lowered the shotgun, eyes beginning to glint suspiciously. "How much?" he demanded belligerently.

"One full pint. Best in the house."

"One full quart."

"I'll throw in a seegar for good measure with the pint," argued Bates.

But the cook was in full position to bargain. He started bargaining by cocking one of the hammers on the red bean and bacon loaded shotgun, shaking his bewhiskered head. "One quart, I said Reddie. The best rotgut they got. And," he added quickly, "that stopper better still be sealed in the bottle when I get it. Sabe?"

Red Bates swore soulfully, groaning aloud at the financial indemnity, adding appropriate remarks about certain types of people being born with rocks in place of hearts; but the cook stood adamant. In the end the youthful puncher was forced to give in.

He rode past the now mollified cook and up to the chuckwagon, bending over from the saddle to get at his warbag as Mutton Chop put away the gun. An object came out and was slid inside his shirt front. Whereupon Bates turned the roan, reining it around casually until its heels were in the general direction of the fire.

Then he slammed in the spurs, hard into the animal's sleek flanks.

A squeal of surprise and indignation went out of the roan. Its hind heels shot out twice and a cloud of dust caught both the cook and his supper fire. The roan, ears still flattened, slammed off down across the flat toward the sinks, faint roars of rage emanating from the rear. Bates turned in the saddle, thumb going up to his nose again.

"Bribe me, will you?" he whooped, wriggling his fingers. "Wait'll the boys start chomping down on sand and gravel when they light into those beans tonight. They'll chase you clean into the sinks!"

He slowed the animal down to a lope, then to a fast jog trot. The bluffs forty feet above the sinks showed up red in the late afternoon sun. Dank smell smote the air and the roan slobbered and then blew a sneeze. The ground became wet again.

The water was low, green and brackish, and, because of the gypsum, fit only for stock. Buck King would prob-

ably have to haul fresh water from town during their stay until the cars arrived and shipping clearance obtained from Ed Harmon, the state brand inspector.

BATES let the roan slosh in up to its knees and then relaxed in the saddle, rolling a smoke while the animal drank its fill. A faint haze of dust far to the south told of the oncoming herd still plodding along. Pretty soon now they would scent the water and increase pace until it became a lowing, bawling trot. Red Bates' eyes went to the water again. It was some four hundred yards in length and about one hundred feet in width where the other side snuggled brackishly along the face of the red sandstone bluff. There would be enough for the herd until it was driven into the pens of Porterville and loaded, twenty-five steers to a car.

The roan lifted its head, streams of water drooling from its mouth as it rolled the bit contentedly. Bates reined it around and rode out, turning northward along the water's edge. The roan blew again and settled into an easy jog trot.

A quarter of a mile north the water ended and the ground became dry once more. A well worn cattle trail led up sharply and came out on high, flat land that was a forest of mesquites. In the distance, three miles away, Porterville's sprawled buildings and new red roundhouse clustered on the rolling prairie. Bates gave a last look back at the chuckwagon, almost a mile distant.

It was too far for his eyes to make out Mutton Chop but imagination took the place of binoculars.

"I'm going to sleep about a half mile from that wagon for the next week until the old walrus cools down a little," he grinned to himself. "Hope he don't tell Buck either. If he does I'm liable tc end up cutting firewood and hauling water from town on a stone sled for the next three days. And maybe Queenie ain't a bride yet."

A small arroyo loomed up, cut by rain water making its way to the sinks down under the bluff, and to avoid the thorny limbs fighting at his clothes Red Bates gigged the roan into its dry, gravelly bottom. He shoved back his weatherbeaten brown Stetson, mind working furiously. Once at the water, the herd would need little handling. Except for a few strays, most of them would remain within a couple of miles. If some legitimate excuse could be found for remaining in town, what joy to look up Queenie, get sweet revenge upon Ed Harmon the inspector for the loss of that six dollars at poker, and return to Tad Brown the object that now reposed bumpily inside Bates' shirt front.

He grinned with the sheer joy of living and let the roan follow the twisting floor of the arroyo toward the edge of the mesquites a mile or so ahead. They rounded a sharp turn and then the animal suddenly shied and lunged sideways, eyes dilated and slobbering sounds coming from its nostrils. Bates reined up, staring.

Horse and rider faced a sandy bank some four feet high and down under it, sticking out of the sand, was a booted foot carrying a spur, and a grotesque looking hand. Something gleamed on one of the dead man's fingers, something that had an all too familiar look.

Ed Harmon, the state cattle inspector for the new railroad shipping point, would play no more poker and inspect no more brands.

CHAPTER III

AT ABOUT the time that Red Bates left the herd that afternoon on his way to the chuckwagon, two other rid-

ers from Porterville were approaching it in a round-about direction from the west. They pulled up among a mesquite clump and slouched in the saddle for a few moments, eyes on the distant herd plodding up the swale.

Frank Yarren shifted his heavy middled weight into a slouchier position in the saddle, scratching himself under a sweaty armpit. He was in his forties, his clothes worn and unwashed, his boots run down at the heels. One spur was a goose-neck, the other a thick shank with a silver dollar for a rowel. He scratched again, shifting the black nailed fingers to his chin. The chin was tobacco stained.

"Well, there they are, all right, Jim," he grunted, reaching for his hip pocket plug.

Jim Terrill nodded, absently. He was in his sixties, lanky, cadaverous, and had been a thief most of his life. His clothes and gear looked much better than his companion's, tribute to his staying away from the poker games in Rome Kennifer's Blue Bird Saloon, where Yarren almost always lost his money.

"I reckon," Terrill said; and then: "For God's sake, Frank, will you stop that scratching? It gets on my nerves. Everytime we walk down the street you've got that right hand down inside your belt scratching your stomach. If it ain't your stomach it's your back or neck or chin or something else.

"Fells good," Yarren commented with low wit humor. "Been thinking I'd get me a long handled hairbrush so's I could saw'er up and down my back."

Terrill grunted and swung down, taking a pair of binoculars from his saddle. "Let's get going," he said. "I want to get back to town before dark. Don't know why Kennifer couldn't have waited until tonight or tomorrow. They'll have to rest up that herd for a day or two and give 'em a chance to put on a little trail weight they lost. The cars ain't there anyhow. We coulda done it tomorrow just as well."

"Maybe," was the reply as Yarren swung gruntingly down. He spat, wiping his mouth. "But suppose Buck King comes in town tonight? Most likely he will. They've been on the trail for several days now. Herd won't be hard to hold near that water. Some of the boys'll probably want to ride in and cut the trail dust from their throats. We've got to tie up that herd a little longer. Somebody on the railroad is going to get wise about them cars and start some hell popping in Porterville. They'll find out sooner or later. So Kennifer ain't taking any chances. Two gets you five that within twenty-four hours Pritchard has Gabe Summers out here trying to buy the whole herd."

They started walking through the underbrush, Terrill carrying the binoculars. They came to the lip of the swale, where the cover ended. Terrill sat down, bracing elbows on his knees, and lifted the binoculars to his eyes. He began adjusting and his companion, flat on his belly now for comfort, removed a pencil stub and dirty envelope of a long ago received letter from a shirt pocket. Some of the dourness left the older rustler's face as he brought the herd up close. He almost got a grin through.

"About nine men, I'd say," he remarked, sweeping the point, swing, and far back to the drag riders, mere dots in the distance. "There comes the wrangler with the remuda. Keep down low. He's coming over this way. Hmm. A Mex."

"No telling where the night wrangler is. Probably back a few miles asleep. He'll be showing up pretty soon, I reckon. It's getting late. Dam' but I'm hungry. Wish I was down at

their chuckbox."

"Never saw you when you wasn't hungry," Terrill half growled, all business now. "All right. Take this one. There's a big black steer. Road branded. Got a slash through the old brand. New, that road brand. But damned if I can make out the old one." He lowered the glasses. "Here, gimme that pencil and paper."

HE TOOK them and copied the brand, using the glasses again. The steer was plodding along, switching at flies. Terrill completed the brand, a peculiar shaped "Y" with a horizontal slash through it. Yarren stared at it a moment, puzzled; then his face brightened.

"Hell, I got it! That's a Mexican brand. Sure, now I remember. Old man Victoriano Yabarra's iron, from down across the Mexican line. Notice that original. Not straight like an American iron would shape a 'Y' but fancy curls on the fork. It's the old boy's iron all right, and that steer's a four year old. Prime stuff."

He took the pencil again and Terrill returned to the glasses, focusing on some of the others. "Put down a J4 brand, high on the right hip," Terrill directed. "A slash road mark through it. And there's a red steer with a Circle K. That's one of Kromper's own critters he raised."

"J4 and Circle K," Yarren repeated, wetting the pencil by sticking it into the tobacco juice back of his lips. He spat, writing laboriously. "That all?" he asked, after a minute or two.

"Can't tell yet. I'm waiting for that brindle steer to get out of the dust. He's right behind that fool puncher riding swing. Hold on—there's another! Double Rocking Chair!"

"That's from down west of Alamonda. Pretty big outfit. Must have sold some of their stuff to Kromper when the feed got short, or maybe they pooled. Any more?"

"That's about all. We'll wait a couple of minutes."

They waited while Terrill's binoculars continued their swing of the herd. Five minutes later he put down the glasses to his lap, rubbing at his eyes. Then he rose.

"Let's get back to town. We'll be lucky if we make it before sundown."

He led off through the underbrush until the mesquites closed in, then straightened to full height, Yarren clomping along behind him in the run-down boots. He spat a wad of wet tobacco into his palm, flung it off to one side, and spat again. He reached under his right arm and began to scratch as they came to the horses.

They swung up, reining around, and with Terrill in front rode single file at a walk. Presently the mesquites thinned for a ways and they jog trotted northward, careful to keep under cover.

"Let's ride past the sinks," Yarren finally suggested. "We can just about tell from the position of the chuckwagon where King will figure on bedding his herd."

Terrill looked at him with contempt in his old rustler wise eyes. Terrill was the best man among the brotherhood when it came to using a running iron to blot a brand.

"What's that got to do with it?" he snorted.

"Maybe quite a lot, dammit. Most of the boys figger that if Kennifer can hold off them cars long enough and make trouble for King and his punchers, Rome can buy the herd. But I know Rome Kennifer. He knows there's been a drouth. This weather is ripe for either a good sandstorm or a dam' good cloudburst. If either of 'em

come Kennifer wouldn't let the chance slip by. He'd have the boys bust into that herd and run off everything not tied down, knowing the wind or the rain would cover up tracks long enough to get 'em into the clear. Then all he'd have to do is drive about a thousand head of his own cows all over the place and mix up any tracks after the rain stopped. Trouble with old time brand blotters like you, Jim, is that you think in terms of two or three head. You'll catch a calf and burn its hooves with an iron so it cain't follow its mammy. When she finally leaves it by being driven a few miles, you'll sneak around and wait a few days and finally use a running iron. Bah! A week's work for maybe two or three calves. Kennifer don't think that way."

"Maybe," Terrill grunted back, shifting his weight to the other stirrup. "But you notice that I'm sixty and I never spent a day in jail in my life. I don't even pack a gun. A lot of men like Rome Kennifer, who had the same big ideas, are rotting away in many an unmarked grave. They got put there because they got too big ideas and because some hard shooting cow punch was too fast with a six shooter. Nope, Rome can have his big ideas. Long as he pays me my wages I ain't kicking. I'll outlive him and a lot of others like him. I might even outlive George Pritchard and that pretty daughter of hisn too."

Yarren let go a ribald laugh that ended in a snicker. "You trying to tell me that a man as owned, or maybe still owns, one of the biggest packing plants in Kansas City is sneaking out nights to rustle a few head on his own? Haw-Haw-Haw!"

TERRILL was dourly unimpressed. He rolled a smoke, reins across the pommel, said nothing for a moment. Finally: "When you been in my business for forty-five years, Frank, you git to where you have a pretty good instinct for spotting an honest man and mebbe one who ain't so honest. I don't know, but I'd bet my last bottom dollar that Porterville's big new millionaire citizen is as crooked as a rattlesnake's back when he's coiled."

Presently they came out on the bluffs above the sinks, but still remained under cover. Terrill unslung the binoculars again, reining his horse around toward the water below.

"There's the chuckwagon," Yarren commented. "Team out grazing. They'll bed the herd about a half mile north. Good grazing out there. They won't stray."

Jim Terrill didn't answer. He was sitting straight and lean for a man of his age, watching the chuckwagon in the distance. A rider had just left it, slamming away at a run. A rider on a roan horse.

"Something's happened down there," he said, the grin finally getting through. "That cook's as mad as a wet hornet. Big gent about six feet four. Lordy, but he's on the prod! Doin' a regular war dance, shaking his fist at that running cow punch. Buzzin' around like a bobcat that's been rubbed with turpentine. Never saw a danged cow wrastlin' cook yet that a man could git along with. I'd hate to be the outfit that eats *that* grub tonight!"

"How do *you* know?" Frank Yarren gibed. "You never punched enough honest cows in yore whole life to get used to chuckwagon grub. Come on—let's get goin'. Speaking of grub always makes me hungry."

They wheeled away and loped back through the mesquites. The trees were thick for awhile but suddenly began to thin out. Terrill reined over hard all of a sudden and threw out a hand

to bar his companion.

"Hold it!" he snapped out in a low voice. "That cow punch."

"Where?"

"Going up that arroyo. Over there about a hundred and fifty yards. Look at that grin on his face. He shore must have done something to that rambunctious cook that pleased—hold on!"

His face had turned hard. He swung on Yarren, then swung back. The hat bobbing along above the lip of the arroyo suddenly had stopped. Beneath the whiskers and general unwashed skin, Frank Yarren's face suddenly turned color.

"My God!" he gasped out in a hoarse whisper. *"He's discovered Ed Harmon's body! ! !"*

He reached down and jerked a heavy repeating rifle from its boot beneath his left leg. It was a big weapon for a saddle gun, a 45-90, throwing a lead slug of more than three hundred and fifty grains.

He half swung his mount's head to the right, then opened the breech of the weapon far enough to make sure of the bright brass shell in the chamber. He closed the breech again and drew back the hammer.

"Better git down," warned Terrill in a whisper. "A man's head ain't a big target at a hundred and fifty yards. He's out of sight now—down off his horse. No doubt about it. He's sure as hell found Ed. Better git down, I say," he warned again.

Yarren grunted his contempt. He had a few qualities as either a rider or poker player or short gun man, but his prowess with a Winchester was unequalled. It was his boast that he could kill a running coyote at two hundred yards twice out of three times, and he had proven it. He grunted again, waiting for the head to appear.

The head reappeared. Yarren swung up the heavy weapon, took quick, almost careless aim, and with the crash of the weapon against his shoulder a stunned look came over his face.

He sat there as the red head wheeled and flashed back down the arroyo from which he had come.

"Now you've done it!" Terrill yelled at him. "Shoot from a horse, will you? Never miss! Come on—let's get outa here fast! Hell's going to pop now, you wait and see!"

CHAPTER IV

RED BATES swung down in a single step and dropped his reins, ground anchoring the roan. His eyes, dead serious now, took in the dead man's boot and hand and the thin spread of sand covering the rest of the body. The sandy bank told the rest of the story. Whoever had killed Harmon—and it obviously was a killer job—had merely placed the body beneath the bank and then jerked loose a few trailing mesquite roots exposed by water cutting away at the side of the arroyo. The action had loosed enough sand to cover the crime for months until heavy rains would fill the cut with a torrent of swirling brown water and carry the body down to the bottom of the sinks.

But wind has a way of playing tricks with sand, and little swirls of it, dancing along the arroyo floor, had swept away enough to leave a foot and hand exposed.

Bates squatted down beside where Ed Harmon lay partly buried, bandanna up over his nose. The odor told him that the murdered inspector had been dead about a week. It was a guess; he couldn't be sure.

He rose and went to the roan, removing a pair of leather gauntlets from a saddle pocket. He slipped on the

gloves and began pulling away the dirt from the dead man's chest. It required only a matter of moments to tell him what he sought to find out: Ed Harmon had been shot squarely through the chest with what probably was a rifle of quite heavy caliber.

Bates rose, the dead man's ring in his shirt pocket, and began stomping at the bank with a boot heel. Sand tumbled down. He spread it, dusted his gloves, removed them and remounted the roan.

He sat there for a few moments, pondering the next move. As far as he recalled, Porterville was not the county seat. The nearest sheriff or deputy might be sixty miles away. Thought of Tad Brown taking charge of the case brought a faint grimace to his young face.

He reined the roan around, and the bullet that would have torn away his lower jaw almost burned his lips. The crash of the weapon that had fired it sounded from the mesquites about one hundred yards to the west. Bates' dull spurs went in hard and he spun his horse, slamming down the arroyo whence he had come.

At a point where the bank was above his head he pulled up to listen, again pondering a next move. His repeating 44-40 Winchester was in the wagon, unnecessary and unwieldly equipment to carry on a saddle during the trail drive. He could return and get it, leaving word with Mutton Chop Beasley for King. But what action would the trail boss take?

Quite likely he would figure that his puncher had stumbled upon the body of the murdered brand inspector at a moment when the actual killers or somebody who knew them happened to be passing by. Never a trouble hunter, Buck King would, in all likelihood, send word to the nearest sheriff of the attempted dry gulch and then confine Bates to camp for protection.

Red Bates, ears cocked for sounds, frowned. A stray thought was rippling across some inner recess of his mind; the possibility that Ed Harmon's murder might have something to do with trail herds coming to Porterville. There was, of course, the possibility that a personal motive for the murder was involved. This theory Bates strongly disbelieved. He had known the dead man too well.

Before his appointment by the Governor as brand inspector at Porterville, Ed Harmon had been Texas cattle buyer for one of the big packing houses at Kansas City. He knew all the big cowmen and most of the smaller ones by name. During drouth years, when markets were flooded and prices down, many a cowman would remember Ed Harmon's generous checks, one such finally having lost him his job.

He had been the kind of man whom other men instinctively liked and respected, and Bates, listening to double hoofbeats growing fainter to the north, put from his mind the personal motive thought. There was something deeper back of this; something sinister that caused the red headed young rider to turn the roan back up the arroyo again, toward Porterville.

THERE was a man there whom he suddenly remembered; a wiry little man named Charley Atlee who ran a livery and who had sat in on the poker session the night Ed Harmon won the six dollars and forty cents and a ring hammered out of a half dollar. Atlee had been Harmon's friend. Red Bates would see about the cars and then go look up Atlee. He wanted to talk things over with Charley.

The shrewd little poker player might know something.

Bates followed the arroyo for nearly a mile until the mesquites fell behind and the flat prairie loomed up ahead, with Porterville's buildings now barely visible back of a slight rise on the plain. He came up onto the flats and movement caught his eye.

Two bay horses carrying riders were bobbing from sight beyond the grassy top of the prairie swell, the distance too great for recognition.

Red Bates swung to the south and, half hour later, jogged the roan into the wide main street lined by many new two story buildings. He made straight for a certain cafe, Ed Harmon's death forgotten for the moment.

He reined up to a halt and sat in the saddle for a few moments, not quite sure of himself. The place where Queenie had worked was changed. A fresh coat of grey paint covered the front and newly lettered in red across the window were the words, *The Town Cafe.*

"I knew it," Bates groaned, memories of his infatuation for Queenie sending a youthful sigh skyward. "Ten to one she's either married or back east some place shooting hash and biscuits at traveling drummers."

He swung down anyhow, dropping reins over the hitch rail. He was tired of trail grub and hungry to boot. The three-mile ride in from Gyp Sinks had jolted down the cake. Weeks on the long drive northward, riding from daylight until dark, plus regular turns at night herding, had given him a "trail stomach." About two orders of ham and fresh eggs and biscuits, he thought, would do the trick.

He loosed the cinch out to the last notch and shook the sweaty saddle and blanket free to insure air circulation and thus prevent possible saddle galls, tugging at the cow horn ring holding his bandana too. Rubber-tired wheels crunched and a fringe-topped, shiny surrey pulled by a span of sleek bays stopped beside him. His roving eye caught the parasol in the back seat, wondered what was back of it, and he paused to straighten the brim of his hat.

"Dog-gone," he murmured at sight of the liveried driver in top hat and cutaway coat, getting down to lower the steps for the lady. "High society in Porterville. Whoop-de-do!"

The parasol, polka dotted and dainty, came down. He caught a glimpse of brown eyes, brown hair, smooth tanned skin that said she'd been out in the sun a lot of late. She rose in the seat and started down, the driver reaching for her arm. Then her foot slipped. Her gasp ended in another muffled gasp as she came full into Red Bates' arms.

Perfume, faint and wonderfully elusive to his nose, smote his senses as he placed her on her feet and stepped back, hand unconsciously removing his battered Stetson. She said, "Thank you very much, cowboy," and then her eyes, interested and amused, played over him. Over his flaming red hair, sweat and salt encrusted checkered shirt, thorn scuffed batwing chaps, and spurred boots. The amusement in them increased at sight of the brass studded cartridge belt sagging at his right hip.

She seemed to find something paradoxical in the worn six-shooter and the obvious touch of embarrassment in his snub-nosed face. It brought forth a low, rich laugh.

"I am very grateful, Mr.—what is the name?"

"Bates," he said blandly. "Homer Redfren Bates. They used to call me Homely Bates and then finally shortened it to Red."

"I am very grateful, Mr. Homer Redfren Bates, that you happened to come

along at the very moment when I did. I might have had a very bad fall. I'm Alma Jean Pritchard. They used to call me Almighty God Pritchard and then finally shortened it to Alma. At least my father did. He's George Pritchard."

"Oh." And after a pause. "George Pritchard. *The* George Pritchard."

"You've heard of him?"

"To tell you the truth, lady," Red Bates replied, "I never heard of him in my life."

She went off into a burst of laughter and said to the driver, standing rigidly by, "This will break Dad's heart, Edward. A cowboy who never heard of George Pritchard. You are a cowboy, aren't you, Mr. Bates?" she added, amusedly.

"Well," he said, grinning, "that's a matter of opinion. Buck King and Mutton Chop Beasley might be inclined to argue the point."

"Who," she inquired, "might Buck King and Mutton Chop Beasley be?"

He told her that King was his boss and Mutton Chop a busted down excuse for a grub rustler.

The amused glint was in her brown eyes again. "And you're a cowboy who never heard of George Pritchard but who, when he forgets himself, speaks good English and doesn't embarrassedly say 'Ma'm' to the ladies. Come along, Edward. The Ladies Emporium will be closing soon. Good bye, Mr. Bates."

"Good bye, *ma'm*," he said, stressing the last word, and put on his hat. He watched her, trailed by the poker-faced Edward, sweep past the cafe's gaudy front to the emporium for ladies next door.

"Dog-gone," Red Bates murmured, again. "Just wait'll I tell the boys that I met George Pritchard's daughter. Maybe Buck'll know who he is," he added hopefully.

CHAPTER V

HE DUCKED under the hitch rail, spurs making rattling sounds as he crossed the porch and entered the cafe. The board counter with its eight stools was deserted but he heard movement back of the curtained doorway leading into the kitchen. Red Bates shifted the pistol into a more comfortable position on his hip and went toward the curtain. He pulled it aside and stepped through.

A woman, large and buxom, stood with her back to him, sleeves rolled up, her arms working deep in a circular wooden bowl. She squeezed dripping dough from first one hand and then the other, brushed at a wisp of hair with an arm, and added more flour. The biscuit dough thickened under her pumping arms.

"Poke McGee, the cook is over at the Blue Bird getting drunk," she said over her shoulder, without turning. "No orders until I get these biscuits done."

"Oh, I'll wait," Bates said. "I got plenty of time."

"Not in here, you won't," she replied snappishly. "Go on out and come back in an hour."

"But I'm hungry," he complained. "And besides, here I've been pining away all these months just thinking of the one girl in the world, the most beautiful—"

She turned abruptly, the glare fading at sight of his snub-nosed, brash grin. "Reddie!" she squealed. "Red Bates, you ornery old hound dog. I didn't know it was you come back after all these months—don't, Red! Red, you mustn't—mmmmphttt! Quit, I say. You mustn't kiss me—mmmmphttt!"

"Here," he said, two or three minutes later, releasing her and heading for the wash basin to clear the trail grime from his hands. "I'll take care of the biscuits while you get me two orders of

ham and eggs going. Got any coffee? Good. Heat it up while I finish the biscuits. I always did think I could cook better than Mutton Chop. But he bakes good cakes," he added.

"I thought you'd forgot all about me," she pouted, face still flushed as she worked over the basin to remove the remainder of the white crumbs. "You didn't even write me a single letter."

His face fell. "Why, didn't I ever tell you, Queenie? I never learned how to write. But I thought about you a lot."

"It's been lonesome here in town. All those rough track builders and gamblers and drunk cowboys. A lady simply has an awful time."

"What ever became of that two-bit marshal who was so jealous because I ate in here all the time? The one I dragged through the mud when he tried to chase me out of town that day he saw you and me walking along the street—"

The front door had opened but Bates, busy slapping at the white mound in the wooden bowl, paid no attention. He went on with his diatribe about the representative of law and order in Porterville, unaware that that glowering individual now stood in the curtained doorway, hand fingering his pistol butt.

The marshal's angry eyes were focused upon the flour outlined imprint of Queenie's two hands on the back of Red Bates' checkered shirt. Bates squeezed off a chunk of dough, slapped it on the bread board, reaching for rolling pin to begin flattening it for work with a biscuit cutter.

His former sojourn in Porterville, followed by an abrupt departure from town pursued by a mud covered marshal, his friend Mike Kelly, and two or three others, had made him well acquainted with kitchen procedure in *The Town Cafe*.

"So that's what I did to that two-bit star picker," he finished to Queenie over his shoulder. "I lost them down in the brush below Gyp Sinks. What I should have done was chase *him* out of town and take over the job myself. Don't know how such a homely, short tempered cuss ever got the job anyhow. Well . . . here's the biscuits, ready for the pan, honey," he finished, turning. "I —ulp! . . ."

QUEENIE too had turned, face paling. Her hand, free of dough, went to her generous bosom; and Bates saw something beside the marshal's angry eyes. On the finger of her left hand glittered a large gold band. She had married!

"Howdy," Bates said weakly to her scowling spouse. "Why, imagine meeting *you* again, Mr. Brown. How's business coming along?"

"Business," grunted the pistol fingering packer of the star, "is good. I own this cafe and my wife runs it and we don't welcome any more trade. If you mean town business, that's good too."

"Why, that's certainly fine," the representative of the Circle K answered heartily. "I always knew you were a bright man, Mr. Brown. And I'm a man who likes to do a friend a good turn. I'll tell all the boys to be sure and eat here when we get the herd in town."

Tad Brown seemed to be in a fingering mood. His other hand tugged hard at one end of a scraggly black mustache. He growled an, "Is zat so?"

"It's a fact," agreed the red head, beginning to breathe almost normally again.

"That's your roan out front, I take it?"

"Nope," said Bates warily. "It ain't my roan and you can't take it."

"Who's it belong to?"

"The Circle K, same being the outfit I punch cows for never end a sentence with a preposition. I wouldn't claim ownership of that bag of bones if it was the last cayuse in Texas."

"I'm dropping the charges against you for that little fracas last spring," Tad Brown said heavily. "Most of the witnesses have by now dusted out of town anyhow. But we got a few new laws here since you left. One of them has to do with loose stock."

"Glad to hear it. I always did say a herd of cows shouldn't be driven through main street. It gives visitors like George Pritchard the wrong impression. I know if I owned a cafe like this one and some fool outfit drove two thousand head down the main drag and got dust in the beans, I'd up and—"

"For your information," the marshal cut in, glaring angrily, "George Pritchard ain't a visitor here. He's going to put up a packing house. And I didn't say anything about cows. I'm talking about loose *horses*."

"Sure, horses too," Red Bates agreed pleasantly. "I don't blame you there either. Just suppose six or seven years from now when one of your six or seven kids was playing out in the street and—"

A giggle that was half bovine gurgle came from Queenie. She placed the hand bearing the wedding ring over her mouth and the sound goaded the already angry marshal of Porterville into action. He jerked out his gun and levelled it at Bates' suddenly constricted middle. Tad Brown's mustache was quivering as a tinge of red crept up his shaggy haired neck. The hand holding the gun shook visibly.

"I'm talking about one particular horse!" he roared. "Yours!"

"But I don't own any cayuse—"

"That roan outside with the Circle K brand. It's loose in the streets."

"Oh, so it is, is it? Just you wait until I get aboard that pile of bones. I'll—"

"That horse," the marshal announced firmly, getting a grip on himself, "is hereby impounded in the town pound. Said horse, one roan with saddle, will be returned to its owner tomorrow morning upon payment of two dollars fee for impounding, plus feed and stall bill at Mike Kelly's livery tonight."

"*Whaaat!*" Bates almost yelled.

"You can get him back in the morning and not before," added Brown.

HE SHOVED the gun back into its sheath and went out, followed by a now very indignant cow puncher; but the marshal only waved him away as he went to the roan still ground anchored in front of the hitch rail. Bates argued volubly and a crowd began to gather. Alma Pritchard emerged from the emporium and paused with her driver, arms filled with packages, one step to the rear. Bates saw a wiry little man with very bright eyes and a flicker of recognition went to Charley Atlee. With Atlee was a girl of nineteen or so, watching the scene with frank blue eyes. The doors of the Blue Bird Saloon, almost in front of where the argument waxed hotter and hotter, bellied outward and three men emerged. One Red Bates remembered as Rome Kennifer, the owner. The second Bates would long remember. Mike Kelly had been in the group that had chased the Circle K man out of Porterville following the episode of the mud puddle. The third was a stranger.

He was a little man, standing not more than five feet three with the weight of about sixty years on his bony shoulders. He wore a dirty white chef's apron and cap, the latter awry on one

side of his shiny bald head. This would be Poke McGee, whom Queenie had said was over in the Blue Bird getting drunk.

Tad Brown, all arguments pushed aside and aware of the crowd gathered on the boardwalk, had lifted the reins over the roan's neck preparatory to swinging up. "Where do you think you've been?" he yelled over the impounded animal's neck. "A hell of a fine cook you are!"

McGee straightened his cap and took a few uncertain steps and pulled up on the edge of the planks.

"I ain't no cook," he informed his erstwhile employer with drunken gravity. "I'm a telegraph operator—the best dam' key poundin' boomer that ever hit this god forsaken country; and don't you ever—*burp!*—forget it, you mush-faced son of a telegraph pole."

Tad Brown's face flamed as a titter went through the spectators. He heard a snicker and turned to fix a baleful eye upon the now grinning Bates. Things decidedly were not going as they should. Respect for Porterville's law had been pretty much destroyed a few months previously when this same red headed cow puncher had dragged him off the boardwalk into a mud puddle. It had taken numerous arrests, a pistol whipping or two, and the shooting of a drunk and befuddled cow hand from a local ranch before proper respect and dignity had been regained. Yet now. . .

A seat in the saddle would give him a more commanding position, and he would continue the affair from there. He wheeled on Poke McGee.

"You're fired McGee!" he shouted, placing a foot in the stirrup. "Get that apron off and get—"

That was about as far as *he* himself got. Other matters came to hand. For as he put his weight into the stirrup things started happening.

He was half way up in the saddle when the loosed girth began to slip. Brown grabbed harder at the horn and the roan instinctively went into action. It went straight up into the air, back arched, with the town marshal, all else forgotten, clawing frantically at the still sliding horn.

For what might have been two seconds the roan appeared to pause off the ground with Brown's figure hanging on its side. There they parted. The marshal spread eagled in a sailing motion, struck the corner of the Pritchard surrey top, and landed flat on his back in the dust of the street behind it. He half raised up, stupified surprise on his face as the roan, its triumph complete, bucked out into the street with the saddle dangling under its belly. Roars of laughter rocked the crowd.

CHAPTER VI

PORTERVILLE'S town marshal rolled over on his left side, a hand going exploringly to his aching hip. The hand also told him that his six shooter was not in the sheath. He lay there and listened to the laughter, his rage mounting to uncontrollable heights. It grew in volume as Red Bates went over and picked up Brown's pistol, which lay some distance away.

Poke McGee staggered over and looked down quizzically. He rocked back on his heels, and after recovering balance pointed a bony forefinger.

"You're drunk too," he accused, hiccoughing. And to the crowd, "He blats off his head about *me* having a few snorts and damned if he ain't so full he can't even get on a' ordinary cow hoss. Works his poor wife to the bone in a hot kitchen and then spends all the money for likker—"

This was a little more than Tad

Brown could stand. Eyes blazing, he got to his feet, started for the still talking chef, and then groaned, clapping a hand to his hip. Red Bates had somehow appeared between them and now the red headed cow puncher extended a pistol, butt first.

In that moment the laughter was hushed. Something in Brown's countenance, a pallor that told of murderous rage out of control, quieted the snickers and closed the open derision in their faces. This was no longer fun. It was murder in the making.

Tad Brown's hand snapped out and seized the gun butt.

He drove the barrel half out in front of him, rigid, trigger pressed hard inside the guard. His left palm flashed to the single action hook hammer and he "fanned" it six times. Alma Pritchard's low cry mingled with the metallic click of the hammer as it fell on one empty chamber after another.

"Oh," Red Bates suddenly apologized, "I must have given you back the wrong gun. *"That's* the one I took off you last spring while you were in the mud. I knew there was some reason why I came to town. I wanted to return that gun."

Some man up the street had caught the roan and was leading it back. Charley Atlee stepped away from the girl with the blue eyes and got it as Bates turned his back on the now thoroughly disgraced marshal of Porterville. Behind him Brown's eyes followed, and a sound like an inarticulate snarl broke from the lawman. His left hand stabbed down at the .45's in loops of the cartridge belt encircling his middle. He fumbled, his hands trembling, trying to get the cartridges free. A step sounded at his side and then another. A hand knocked the gun to the ground and Tad Brown saw Rome Kennifer's blue jowled face. The man's glinting black eyes were cold with sheer rage and contempt. "So that's Bates, the gent you've been raving about?"

Mike Kelly was with him, and not far distant stood the only man in the crowd who wore two guns. This was Lin Davis, foreman of Kennifer's big ranch south and west of town. Davis had killed a man in Porterville not long before. His eyes were on Bates; dull, expressionless.

"You damned blundering jackass," grunted out the owner of the Blue Bird. "Pick up that gun—Bates got your other one—again!—and get inside."

"Come on, Tad," Mike Kelly added. "Let's go inside."

THE two went to the porch, Brown limping. Bates, not missing anything, saw the eyes of the gunman upon him and he saw the blue eyed girl turn away from Mike Kelly with a look of disgust upon her face. But Rome Kennifer still stood in the street. His weight would have crowded two hundred, with just a little around his midriff. He wore no hat and his eyes and hair matched: both glossily black. He wore white shirt and worn trousers, but the most striking feature was a pair of sandals of handmade leather with no sox underneath. His toes showed bare.

Bates had taken over the roan and checked the cinch which had been the marshal's misfortune. He stuck out his hand and smiled.

"Glad you came back, Red," Charley Atlee said quietly. "Tad's had that coming for a long time."

"I remember the poker games, all right," Bates replied and dropped the stirrup down off the saddle horn. The humor in the situation was gone. He knew what had happened behind his back, had from the first been certain than the fallen marshal would try to make a play. That was why the

man's *loaded* Colt now reposed in his checkered shirt front, in lieu of the empty weapon he had for months been carrying in his warbag.

"Ed Harmon was in the game that night," Atlee added as Bates swung up.

He sat there, looking down. Was Atlee hinting something? Did the wiry little man connect the dead inspector's name with a murder that apparently was not yet known to the public? Bates' eyes glinted a little. He said, "Harmon still a friend of yours?"

"He kept his horse in my stable. Five Star Livery down the street a ways. If you're staying in town tonight and your roan isn't impounded, I always welcome business. Ed's a friend of mine. Or *was,*" he added as an after thought.

"Thanks." I might look you up."

He reined over and started down the street. The crowd was thinning out. Tad Brown and Mike Kelly were disappearing into the Blue Bird. Poke McGee rocked toward the cafe in front of which stood the bovine Queenie, hands on big hips.

Only Kennifer had not moved. He held up a hand as Bates rode by.

"Haven't I seen you somewhere before?" asked Kennifer.

"Never was there. Never heard of the place."

"Didn't you play some poker in my place last spring?"

"I've played poker in a lot of places, some good, some bad. You the sheriff, by any chance?"

"No sheriff here," grunted Rome Kennifer. "He's at the county seat many miles from here. Town marshal is the only law we need in Porterville. Anything more than that we citizens can handle. Where'd you come from, mister?"

"Same place I'm going," Red Bates replied, cautiously.

The standing man's eyes were on the brand on the roan's left shoulder. "Circle K, eh?"

Bates hid his exasperation by leaning down and looking at the brand. His lips were a little thin. "Well I'm damned! Now how in the devil do you suppose *that* got on there?" he demanded sheepishly, straightening.

IT WAS the other man's turn to become exasperated. A look of irritation crossed his smoothly shaven face. Rome Kennifer was remembering that two of his men had taken a shot at this same rider that afternoon while out checking the brands on the oncoming herd. They had, with the aid of powerful binoculars, brought back the information Kennifer wanted. On the return to town they had stumbled upon the Circle K rider examining Ed Harmon's remains and blundered badly in a dry gulch attempt.

The information this man possessed, Kennifer knew, was dangerous. This puncher had been fired at and was alert. Nor was he a fool despite his brash bearing. He must be thrown off guard; lulled into a sense of security.

Rome Kennifer controlled his anger and tried again. "When did you blow in, stranger? Nothing personal. I merely make it a standing rule that the first drink is on the house to any rider coming in with a new herd. You just get in?"

Bates' off side rowel touched the roan and the animal began to cavort restlessly, switching its tail. "You real sure you're not the sheriff?" he demanded.

"No sheriff in Porterville, I said. Tad Brown's the law here, aided by Mike Kelly. If that's what worrying you, forget what happened a few minutes ago. I'll square it with Tad."

"My mistake. But you look like a sheriff anyhow. Cattle buyer, huh?"

"I own the Blue Bird. Cattle buy-

ers in town at present are George Pritchard, who's building a slaughter-house here, me and Gabe Summers—and you might warn that trail boss of yourn that Rome Kennifer says to look out for Summers. He's a shark. Can't be trusted."

"Much obliged. If I ever meet a trail boss who's got any cows to sell I'll certainly tell him to be on the look-out for any cattle buyers. And when you go back inside you tell Tad Brown that I'll deliver his other gun at his house sometime tonight."

He wheeled and loped off down the street, leaving Kennifer staring after him. He grinned again at thought of the saloonman relaying the news to the marshal. Bates wanted to visit the local jail and talk with Bert Donnel, should he be there, and he didn't like risking the marshal's presence in the darkness.

Thought of Brown, waiting at home for the expected visitor, with a six-shooter dangling between his knees in front of the front door, brought a fresh grin to Homer Redfern Bates' young face.

He left the buildings of the town behind and jogged out onto the flat Texas plain, heading for the loading pens a half mile away. Dusk was beginning to close in, and it came rapidly with darkness on its heels. The outlines of the loading pens, white and gleaming, showed up before Bates saw the string of cars just beyond, on the siding.

"Don't look like any forty cars though," Bates muttered, peering. "Nearer twenty, I'd say. Maybe they're short and could only send a few. Others'll probably be along in time."

He reached the pens and rode around them to the siding, and then he reined up in surprise. The twenty or so cars were plain freight stuff.

There wasn't a single cattle car on the siding!

Something was wrong. Something was *damned* wrong! The Old Man had written ahead more than three weeks ago. He had instructed the agent in Porterville to write a letter to Jake Kromper, Circle K Ranch, Care of the Postmaster, Cedar Flats, and send it via the stage line running from Porterville into the railless country to the south.

And there had been no message. Ace Sampson had left the herd and ridden more than sixty miles out of the way to get a letter that wasn't there.

"Something tells me," Red Bates grunted, reining around, "that I'd better go over and visit awhile with that agent at the station."

CHAPTER VII

THE station was newly built, monument to Porterville's increasing statue as a thriving town, with a west wing porch for daytime protection of passengers and loafers from rays of the burning summer sun. Bates got down at the hitch rail, his boot heels making hard sounds on the red flagstones as he crossed past the corner and entered the waiting room by the front door.

The room with its hard, newly painted benches was deserted and quite dark by now. Across the counter, at the operator's table, a shaded light threw yellow spray over the key, now clicking idly away as though entertaining the man with the green eye shade. The operator looked up from his magazine, an arm with a garish garter band shifting impatiently.

"If you're waiting for the train, cowboy, it won't be in for another hour," he said. "If you want a ticket, I'll sell you one in the morning when it goes out again at nine o'clock."

He went back to the page which bore the title of "Train Robbers in Kansas, or, The Outlaw's Son," with appropriate illustrations to match.

"Thanks," Red Bates said, pushing back his hat and reaching for tobacco sack and papers. "I'm on the trail of some cars."

"Ain't seen any," grunted the agent, without bothering to look up. "But if you'll stick around about an hour, you can catch four when the passenger comes in."

"Ha, ha," Bates replied dryly.

The station agent looked up again, placing the magazine on the table. He was scowling now as a match flared above the counter. The light from the blazing stick applied to the end of a brown paper cigarette disclosed a young face that was slightly snub-nosed, generously spotted with freckles, and, under ordinary circumstances, care free. But there wasn't anything either warm or care free in the glint the agent saw in a pair of cow country eyes. They were boring at him steadily as breath blew out the light.

"Maybe my eyes aren't so good, now that I'm getting along in years and a bit crotchety from old age," a biting voice said from the darkness six feet away. "But I didn't see forty cars I think I should have seen out there on that siding above the loading pens. Come to think of it, I don't remember seeing a single one of the kind generally used for shipping cattle. Maybe you could tell me why."

"Cars?" asked the agent blankly.

"Cars. K-A-R-Z. Those things with little iron rollers underneath and a roof on top with slits in the sides, so that the cows can enjoy the scenery while they're on their way to cow heaven. About forty to forty-two to take care of one thousand head going north."

The agent got up. The magazine was forgotten now. "Where are you from?" he demanded.

Bates let go a tired sigh. "Texas, mister. It's a big kind of orange colored splash down on the tail end of a school book geography. More cows and less milk, more rivers and less water, and you can see further and see less than any state in the union. You ought to come down and visit the place sometime," he added.

The agent shot an uneasy glance about him, the constricted feeling in his stomach a warning. The cigarette tip was glowing, throwing that hard young face into focus again, and its mein was a decidedly unpleasant thing to view at the moment.

"I don't know anything about any cars," he finally grunted.

"Don't the mails run through this country any more?"

Civic pride flared in the agent's chicken breast. Some of his lost courage began ebbing back. "We get it every day—that is, for anybody who can spell," he sneered.

"Then you didn't get a letter from Jake Kromper, Circle K Ranch, down at Alamonda, asking for at least forty cattle cars to be waiting here on the siding at a specified date, said date being today—tomorrow at the latest?"

BUCK KING had specified that date, desiring to have the cars a day or so ahead of time, in case of any unforeseen delay. It was King's way of doing business. The trail boss never took unnecessary chances.

"I don't know anything about a letter," denied the agent. "I didn't get any letter asking for forty cars."

Red Bates thought swiftly. There was the possibility that the letter had gone astray and not reached its destination; but ever since the finding of Ed Harmon's body the Circle K man's sus-

picions had been feeling out like the tentacles of a crawling octopus. True, the brand inspector might have been bush whacked to satisfy a personal grudge on the part of some man or men in town; but this Bates strongly doubted. He and his father, now in the state capitol at Austin, had known Ed Harmon in the days when he bought their cattle for his big firm in Kansas City. Harmon had been a square man, a friendly and generous man, a man who made no enemies.

The thought still persisted that the brand inspector's murder had something to do with the herds making up the first big fall shipping season since the railroad was finished.

"I think you're a liar," Bates told the agent calmly. "But we'll let it pass for the moment. Maybe you didn't get the letter. But I think you did get a visit about these same cars from a man named Bert Donnell, said Donnell being another Circle K rider sent on ahead to make sure of what I'm making sure of now. To wit, forty or forty-two cattle cars, signed, unsealed, and delivered here in Porterville, Texas, to wait one thousand head of prime four year old steers, twenty-five to a car. If that's not plain, I'll print it on a piece of paper."

"Oh . . . Donnell," the agent answered and tried to register surprise. "Now I seem to remember."

"That's lovely. It's downright wonderful. Now we're getting a loop going. What about Donnell?"

"He's that cow punch who got drunk and tried to take the town apart. Picked a fight with Tad Brown when Tad tried to arrest him for tearing up Kennifer's Blue Bird saloon. Mike Kelly shot him while helping Tad."

"Shot him?"

The agent nodded. "Mike had to do it, cowboy. Self defense."

It got quiet there in the darkened waiting room where Red Bates stood; so quiet that the uneasy agent stirred and cleared his throat. "About them cars," he began, "I could probably wire for them in the morning—"

"Did you see the shooting?" the man with the cigarette asked.

"No, but there were plenty of witnesses. And it was the same old story. We've only had about three herds shipped through here since the railroad was finished, but every time one hit town the trail riders all figured they had a right to tear up the place. Shootings, mostly at windows. Riding horses across store porches. Fighting with the town's bad women. So Rome Kennifer and George Pritchard—he's opening up a big packing plant here to can meat like they do peaches and such—anyhow, them and some others got together and decided something ought to be done to keep this town from becoming a tough place. The sheriff over at the county seat, sixty miles from here, is an old rheumatic buzzard who finally offered to send in a deputy, but the businessmen told him we could run it. And we can too. This Donnell gent was one of the first to find it out. Him and the rest of you cow hands are finding out that we got a nice respectable town here."

Bates had listened, unimpressed. The cigarette, burned to a butt in his stubby fingers, was still trailing smoke from its ash tipped end. Bates' eyes were boring at the agent.

Now he reached for telegraph pad and pencil, dropping the butt. He scribbled rapidly in a surprisingly legible hand, straightened, shoved the yellow sheet across, and reached for a silver dollar.

"Get that through to the road master at the next division point," he instructed tersely. "Tell him at least forty

cars and maybe a couple or three extra. Those steers aren't babies. They're big four year olds."

The agent nodded, but ended by shaking his head dubiously. "All right, cow punch, I'll send it first thing in the morning—"

"You'll send it tonight, mister."

"But there's nobody on duty at the next division point at this time of night," protested the man wearing the green eye shade. "I'm only here to check on the train until it gets in. Time comes in from up the line. As the train passes each station the other operator shoots along the message and then goes home."

A NOISE came from outside. Red Bates unconsciously moved to one side, throwing his body out of line with the open window back of him. It led out onto the west end porch. Two men crossed in a blurr and the puncher's hand dropped down, shaking the six shooter sharply in its sheath to loosen the weapon.

His ears followed their progress as the steps echoed hollowly around to the door. The night was quite black outside by now.

Red Bates looked at the agent. "Friends of yourn?" he asked softly.

The man shook his head. "How the devil do I know?" he half snarled. "I ain't got the eyes of a night owl. If you—oh, it's Mr. Pritchard and Gabe Summers. Howdy, Mr. Pritchard. Hello, Gabe."

Bates stepped back a little further into the darkness, hand nestling close to the heavy six shooter at his hip, eyes taking in the figure of the older man. He was in his fifties and stood a good six feet two inches, with long, carefully combed sideburns bristling out on each cheek. Everything in the set of his square shoulders, the cut of his clothes, the "topper" hat he wore proclaimed him the man of money and influence.

So this, then, was the father of the girl Alma?

Nice girl, Bates thought. And, for that matter, so was that one of about nineteen who had stood beside Charley Atlee on the porch in front of the Blue Bird. Bates suddenly got the idea that he liked Porterville better and better all the time.

He let his now brittle eyes play over Gabe Summers. Summers had been the cheap cow buyer, the shoestring parvenu, who had been in the bunch chasing Bates out of town. There had been no particular enmity between them. He had scarcely known the man, spoken to him a few times, even bought him a drink. He supposed that Summers, licking the boots of Tad Brown at that time to get in favor with the law, had joined in to show which side he was on.

Summers was shorter than Pritchard, thin to a point that made him look stooped. He was forty or more, dressed too like a "businessman" but the clothes were cheaper. His face was shrewd, crafty, sharp. Red Bates, standing there in the darkness beyond the circle of light, wondered what the two men had in common. He guessed that Summers, out to feather his own nest with the best man, was trying to ingratiate himself with the big man from Kansas City.

"Good evening, Tolson," George Pritchard nodded. He laid a pair of fine gloves on the counter. "A telegraph blank, please."

"Why, sure, Mr. Pritchard. But I —this is—ulp—"

"Well?" impatiently.

"Why—"

Tolson's frightened eyes darted to Red Bates' face. Bates had moved in a bit closer now, leaning lazily against

the counter not more than three feet from the other two. Though something in that apparently relaxed position told the now shaking operator that he was in a tough spot. He saw it in Bates' eyes. The red head's orbs were cold and hard, and yet they held a glint as though the man back of them was thoroughly enjoying the predicament in which Tolson now found himself. He had refused to send a telegram that night for cars on a pretext which was, to say the least, most flimsy; yet now George Pritchard, the man everybody in Porterville apparently was fawning over, was saying, "Well, what is it, man? What's the trouble?"

"The trouble," cut in Bates' drawling voice, "is that he's kind of like the coon who ducked in one end of a hollow log to get away from a hound and, when he started out the other, found the hound's older brother sitting there waiting for him to make the next move."

Some kind of a startled gasp came from Gabe Summers. His face changed color, and fear came into his eyes. His hand started down beneath his coat, stopped cold as he found himself staring down the barrel of a six shooter.

"I wouldn't do it, Gabe," Bates said softly. . "Tad Brown tried it this afternoon and it didn't work. Mike Kelly didn't want to deal himself a hand. I don't think you better try it either."

CHAPTER VIII

"WHAT the devil is all this?" demanded Pritchard testily, as though the interruption was wasting very valuable time.

"Nothing at all," grinned the puncher. "Gabe here got the idea of helping Tad Brown and Mike Kelly and some of their friends make this town sorta unhealthy for me a few months back because Tad wanted the field to himself with the bee-utiful woman who is now his devoted wife. So, being a peaceful sort of cuss, I just left town, not wanting to hurt Tad's feeling any more after dragging him through a mud puddle."

Pritchard let go with a roar of laughter. He shook all over while Summers stood by with a weak grin on his face. The bigger man finally stopped laughing and reached out to shake hands.

"So you're the cow puncher who had it out with Brown a little while ago?" he chuckled.

"Not me," denied Bates. "It was strictly between him and my cayuse. The horse won. Don't know why any fool marshal would want to wrestle with a horse, since he's quite some lighter and ought to know he couldn't throw a roan sixteen hands high."

Pritchard went off into lusty bellows of laughter again. He wiped his eyes. "So you're the man my daughter met this afternoon? She came home and told me about it. Look here, young fellow, we're giving a house warming party Friday night to celebrate the finishing of the new home I've built for my family. I'm inviting about half the town. Come on up and join the fun. I'm sure my daughter would like to see you again."

"I dunno," Homer Redfren Bates said dubiously. "Tad might take a notion to try to wrestle my roan again. If he does, I'll probably do a repeat performance out of town again with him, Mike Kelly, and Gabe here chasing me again."

"Look, Bates," Gabe Summers put in weakly. "I'm sorry about that. How about letting bygones be bygones? I ain't got no grudge against you."

"That's shore generous of you," Red Bates grunted, lapsing into cow country vernacular again. He turned to Tolson: "Better send Mr. Pritchard's telegram.

Then you can send one for me. That one I just wrote out," he added.

Pritchard had reached for the telegraph pad and pencil Tolson had shoved across. He was scribbling industriously. Gabe Summers stirred and cleared his throat.

"If you don't mind, George," he said, "I think I'll go on back to the hotel. Got to see a cattleman about some cows for that new plant of yours when it gets going. Nothing like lining up business ahead, is there?"

He turned and went toward the door. Bates said, "When you get down to the Blue Bird tell Tad I'll still be around to deliver his gun sometime tonight."

Something like a growl came from Summers. He disappeared into the night. Pritchard finished writing and shoved the telegram across the counter. "You can get this through to Austin, can't you, Tolson?"

"Oh, yes sir. The Governor's mansion. I'll put it right through, Mr. Pritchard. Right away, sir."

Bates had, without being noticed, managed to ease himself a little closer, his eyes on the sheet. They had followed the writing. The telegram read:

> Urgently request the appointment of Gabriel Summers as State Cattle Inspector for this district, to replace Ed Harmon, who is not attending to his duties in proper fashion. This town rapidly growing in importance since the coming of the railroad, and Summers is a man I can recommend without reservation.
>
> George Pritchard, Director,
> Kansas Meat Canning Corp.,
> Porterville, Texas.

He looked up, saw that Bates' eyes were looking at him steadily.

"I read it," Red Bates announced calmly.

"Why? What business is it of yours, young man?"

"I don't know—yet."

"What do you mean 'yet?' "

Bates shifted his weight against the counter, reaching for his tobacco sack. He took out papers. "Ed Harmon was a friend of mine. By a co-incidence he used to be the best cattle buyer the Kansas Meat Canning Corporation ever had. You fired him."

Pritchard's face had taken on a stern look. The sideburns quivered a little. The big financier was getting mad.

"Well?" he demanded. "What about it? Of course I fired him. He'd have bankrupted the firm if I hadn't, paying outrageous prices to broken-down cowmen for cattle not worth their feed."

"I notice," came the bland reply, "that you still look pretty well fed, Mr. Pritchard. But we'll let it pass. So Ed came down here, appointed by the state as brand inspector. Now the man who fired him is asking to have him replaced by a cheap, boot-licking ex-cow thief who'd cut his own uncle's throat for a dollar. Something is rotten here in this town. It's rotten because Ed Harmon is dead. He's been dead about a week. I found his body this afternoon, shot with a Winchester."

MOVEMENT came from somewhere without; the window back of him. He heard a man's voice cry out in fright—the poker-faced Edward holding the carriage team—and Bates wheeled, dropping flat. A six-shooter roared through the window, a foot-long streak of flame lashing light into the room. Bates' gun came out as he fell and he thumbed three shots at the window and then rolled over again. He heard a yell, running feet. He jumped up and ran to the window, trying to crawl through and finding it difficult because of the chaps.

Edward was out, sitting in the front

seat, high up, holding the plunging team. The would-be assailant had disappeared.

"Where'd he go?" he rapped out sharply.

"Th-that way, sir. Toward town."

Red Bates sheathed the pistol and started toward his horse, but a shout had come from within. He hurried inside. Pritchard was leaning far over the counter, and for a moment he thought the man had been shot. Then he saw Tolson. Tolson would send no more telegrams. The man, in line of fire, had been shot squarely through the bridge of his thin nose.

"I think," Bates said, "that it's time for Reddie to drift. Maybe we'll meet again, Mr. Pritchard.

He ran out, leaped into leather, and loped away toward the loading pens, cutting a circle back toward the west end of town. This thing was getting hot. Trouble was brewing. Scattered fragments were being fit together to paint an ominous picture. So far there had been no open conflict, except the half ridiculous quarrel between himself and the town marshal.

But Ed Harmon had been murdered. Two men had tried a dry gulch that afternoon and failed. Another had tried and killed the agent by mistake. Bates thought he'd better go talk to Charley Atlee before the night was out. Because by tomorrow, in broad daylight, his life wouldn't be worth a thin dime in Porterville.

Up until now he'd had things pretty much his own way. But the pressure was on. The finding of Ed Harmon's body had changed everything. He was the only man besides the actual killer who knew where Ed was buried. He was the one man who could bring in law—law of a different kind from Tad Brown's variety—and endanger those responsible for the crime. But if Bates was killed, then who could prove the brand inspector dead?

Bates hit the outskirts of town.

Somebody with a burst of civic ambition had sunk a well at the west end of main street and the outlines of its windmill showed up near a dark freight yard. Bates watered the roan and then rode over two hundred yards to Charley Atlee's Five-Star Livery. He leaned from the saddle, opened the yard gate, closed it behind him, and hid his horse in a stall. Light from the office up front showed under the closed door and the red-headed puncher knocked.

Back of the door a chair scraped softly and, after a moment, Charley's voice called out a soft who's there?

"Your great grandmother," Bates said. "I'm peddling a new hair restorer guaranteed to grow a horse's tail on a bald eagle."

The door opened, the shotgun in the stableman's hand bumping its stock back to the floor beside the jamb.

"Come in," Atlee said. "I was sorta hoping you'd drop by."

Bates stepped inside and the owner closed the door, waving the visitor to a chair. In another sat a girl; the same nineteen-year-old with the level eyes who had been with Charley that afternoon. The puncher promptly removed his hat.

"My daughter, Mary Ann," Charley Atlee grinned. "She saw the ruckus this afternoon. Mary Ann, this is Red Bates, probably the worst poker player in Texas."

BATES looked into the frank blue eyes and began to feel queer little chills run down to his feet. He had the feeling that his toes might be curling up, she was that pretty.

"I saw you on the porch this afternoon," he said, taking the chair.

"I saw you out in the street this

afternoon," she said. "You're in for trouble."

Bates' eyes flicked to the shotgun. He had put back his hat. Now he shoved it a little further to the rear and grinned.

"Do you greet all your visitors so kindly," he asked Atlee, "or were you going out to see if there was a duck in the town's horse trough? There wasn't. I was just there. Not even a mud hen," he added.

"It's loaded with buckshot," Atlee said.

"Oh, quail, huh? Nothing like a good mess of bob whites hit with buckshot. You can spit out the pellets in your plate and imagine you're eating dried prunes. Anyhow, you got that fool cook of ours beat. He uses beans and chopped up bacon rinds."

Atlee let go a chuckle. "I'm afraid that wouldn't do in this town. It might work on a fence busting cow . . . or a certain town marshal I didn't crave to have as a son-in-law."

"Son-in-law?"

"And don't you go getting any ideas either, Red," chuckled the little stableman. "I don't want her to face the prospects of becoming a widow—"

"Dad!" protested Mary Ann, blushing. And to Bates: "Don't pay any attention to him."

Charley Atlee gave her a fond glance, then his face sobered. "It might happen," he admitted with amazing frankness. "I'm not too popular in this town with certain elements lately—particularly so since I caught up your roan horse this afternoon."

Bates reached for tobacco sack, rolling a cigarette. He leaned back and reached for a match, sliding a booted and spurred foot across a corner of Atlee's desk. He lit the match, cupping it to his face. But the air of casualness was a mask covering a mind working at top speed on a number of knotty problems. A remark that Tad Brown had made about impounding the roan in Kelly's livery stable now came to the fore, bringing up the thought that perhaps Kelly and the marshal were in cahoots in a pretty neat little scheme which was adding quite a few dollars to the pockets of both. Unfortunately for the two, a loose cinch and a roan horse that specialized in loose cinches appeared to have robbed them of another prospective customer.

"Business competition?" queried Bates.

"Partly."

Atlee reached for the corner of his desk where a battered pipe lay in an ash tray fabricated from the lid of a lard can. He knocked out the cold dottle and began packing in fresh tobacco from an old-fashioned string purse doing duty as a pouch.

"Partly?"

"Tad don't like me because I threatened to blow off his head if he didn't stop bothering Mary Ann. That was before he married Queenie. Now Mike Kelly seems to have the same idea. Frankly, I don't quite know which way to jump. If I had any sense, I suppose that for her sake I'd sell out and pull stakes. But I'm not a running man. And damned if she doesn't agree with me."

"I see," Bates said softly. "I sorta of got the notion this afternoon that Tad was using the roan as an excuse to hold me in town overnight to have me put out of the way."

"On account of Queenie?"

Red Bates shook his head. He asked a question. "Charley, how long since you've seen Ed Harmon?"

Atlee puffed reflectively, a peculiar glint coming into his eyes. "Ed disappeared about a week ago. I got a

letter from him from Mud Flats, the railroad division point two hundred miles up the line, saying as how he'd resigned and wouldn't be back. Hinted about trouble catching up with him. Asked me to go over and get the stuff out of his shack and keep it until he got back."

"You real sure he wrote it?" Bates asked, sharply.

Charley looked surprised. "Why . . . . I suppose so, Red."

"Well, he didn't," Red Bates said grimly. "Ever see this ring before? It's the one he won off me in the poker game we were all in that night last spring, remember? The last time we all played together. Ed won't be back but he didn't go to Mud Flats. Ed Harmon is dead, Charley. I stumbled across his body this afternoon, out about two miles. He'd been shot in the back with a rifle. And somebody who knew about it or did it came along with another rifle and put a slug so close to my chin I won't have to shave for a week."

"Good God!" Charley Atlee cried out, his face going white.

CHAPTER IX

BATES told him everything that had happened while the wiry little stableman sat puffing silently on his pipe. The girl Mary Ann let her eyes play on Bates' freckled face. When the Circle K man was finished Atlee removed the pipe and laid it back in the ash tray.

"So that's how it is, eh?" he asked softly.

"That's how it is," Bates nodded. "But where does Pritchard fit into the picture?"

"My guess," Charley replied, "is that Pritchard is kind of like the big cowman who'll buy cows and not too particular about their brands or where they came from as long as the price is right. I think he's hooked up with Rome Kennifer and his men. Figure it out for yourself, Red. Pritchard came in here to build a big meat canning plant, which is about ready for operation in a week or two. He knew Kennifer not only owns a big ranch a few miles from here, but is a power in town. He knows Kennifer has been buying stock—he bought up one whole trail herd. Two outside buyers who came in here disappeared. They just vanished. So it looks to me like Pritchard, being a businessman, has hooked up on an agreement with Kennifer. Kennifer furnishes the cattle. Doesn't make any difference where or how he gets 'em. He got that last herd plenty cheap, but not until there was a stampede or two and a puncher wound up shot. It's on his ranch right now, waiting for the packing plant to open. You get the idea? If Kennifer can get cows cheap—and maybe sometimes for nothing—he can sell 'em to Pritchard at below market prices."

"That kind of ties in with Ed Harmon's murder too, I reckon," Bates replied slowly. "Yep, it's beginning to fit now. Ed was as square as they came. He'd have had a hawk eye on every brand that went into the slaughter chutes at the new plant. They wouldn't have run a week until he'd have got half the Texas Rangers down here for a cleanup. So the only thing to do was put Ed out of the way, make it look like he'd drifted, and then get another man appointed. Now I know why Pritchard is letting Gabe Summers hang onto his coat tails. Gabe would sure be the right man for brand inspector here in Porterville."

Mary Ann stirred in her chair. "But what can you do? You can't buck a combine like that. Dad, you're in bad

enough now, what with Kelly making things hard for you and the way he. . . ." She didn't finish it, but Bates knew. Kelly was after the girl.

"I don't know. . . . yet, Mary Ann," Red Bates said to her, using the name for the first time. "But Ed Harmon was my friend and I'm going to get the man who killed him. Donnell was my friend, and they killed him too because he was a Circle K puncher. No other reason than to throw a scare into King. That was a mistake on their part. Well," he added, getting to his feet, "I'll be sloping."

"Where you going?" Charley Atlee asked, also rising.

"I don't know right now. Into the brush, I think. If I do, I'll try to slip in nights and see you. Keep your eyes open, Charley—and keep that lead sprayer handy. Good luck, Mary Ann."

"The same to you, Red."

He went out into the barn and led the roan down the stall. Charley came with him. Suddenly he held up a hand. "Wait a minute," he said, low voiced. "Stay here."

Sounds were drifting through the blackness. There seemed to be a lot of riders around. Voices, faint and indistinguishable, floated through the night. Atlee was gone almost a half hour. He slipped wraith like into the stall. He was panting, as though he'd been running.

"Whew!" he got out. "I'm getting old, I guess."

"What's up?" snapped out Bates.

"I been down town. It's buzzing. Pritchard was at Kennifer's reporting Harmon's murder and somebody killing Tolson the agent—and good riddance that. I'll try to get Poke McGee the job in the morning. And he'll get that message through about them cars."

"What else?" Bates demanded, feeling that Atlee was holding something back.

"They're after you. Combing the town. Want to make you take them to that body. And, Red, Buck King is in Kennifer's. I wish I could help but I've got Mary Ann to think of. Red, get down there quick, but watch yourself."

BATES was almost tugging the roan out of the livery barn. He swung up and Charley ran to open the gate. Bates cut across the street at a lope, suddenly remembering three empty shells in his gun. He reloaded while loping down a back alley. Behind the Blue Bird he hit the ground and slipped in through the back door. He went into a card room and cracked the door, putting an eye to the crack.

Death was in the air. Buck King was hemmed in.

Through the crack in the door Red Bates surveyed the room. A long bar ran along the west wall with a be-mustached man in white apron standing rigidly back of it, something in his mein conveying the impression he was ready to drop flat in split seconds. That was natural because leaning with his back to it, elbows supporting him, was Buck King. The middle-aged trail boss's face was a blank expression, only his brittle, blazing eyes telling what lay in his mind. He held a drink in his left hand, a full glass of whiskey as yet untouched, and the hand was as steady as a rock.

King wore no cartridge belt. His old six-shooter was stuck down in the right leg pocket of his fringed leather chaps.

The cowman's eyes were on Mike Kelly. Kelly stood twenty feet away, backed by a lean man in his sixties who didn't pack a gun. But the dirty looking, heavy-set man casually scratching himself under an armpit did.

It was obvious that he was backing Kelly's play. Over against a far wall, frozen and waiting, stood Tad Brown. His was a strictly hands-off attitude. Gabe Summers was present, silent and motionless, waiting. They were all waiting. And it was noticeable that George Pritchard was absent.

Bates didn't know yet whether the man, in reporting the killing of Tolson, had done so to inform Rome Kennifer or spread it merely as a matter of news. But one thing was certain: Buck King must have been there when he arrived and possibly even when the trouble began to brew, and Pritchard had had no desire to be present when a shooting took place. That was, of course, natural. Pritchard was a big financier, rapidly assuming leadership in town, and couldn't afford to have his name mixed up with a framed-up killing.

At the end of the bar, by the swinging doors, stood Rome Kennifer, one sandaled foot, without sock, in sight. He was leaning casually, almost bored, as though impatiently waiting for Kelly to hurry up and get it over with.

Bates' eyes went back to Kelly's face. It was indifferent, sardonic. A cigarette dangled from a corner of his mouth, smoke trailing lazily upward from his lip past the brim of his hat. Mike Kelly had come to Porterville as a railroad laborer, but quickly left the job and shifted to other activities. His rise to a man with plenty of spending money had brought quiet speculation that the money might have had something to do with the series of holdups, murders, and muggings which swept Porterville during its building boom days. Charley Atlee had mentioned something about a report that he was on the dodge, and that he had about as much Irish in him as Charley's aged airdale mastiff. It meant that Mike Kelly was not his real name.

Kelly now looked at King again.

"I called you a liar once," he said. "I'm saying it again, mister. You know where he is."

"I don't know where he is," King replied quietly. "If I did I wouldn't tell a stinking dog like you anyhow. I sent him to town to find out about some cars. I told him to stay sober, hunt up Ed Harmon, the brand inspector, and tell him we've got the herd here. If he did a repeat performance on your marshal this afternoon and it wasn't justified, I'll handle that. Anything else you've got to say."

THREE men sitting at a poker table, cards frozen in their hands, stirred. One cleared his throat. A man leaning against the opposite wall, far out of line of fire muttered, "Dam'!" and dropped the cigarette that had burned his fingers.

Kelly said, "You damned cow punchers are all alike. You come in here and figure you've got a right to bust up the town. Your man Donnell tried it, picked a fight with me after loading up on whiskey. Now this Bates younker comes in—"

"Now *you're* a liar," came the foreman's level voice with that same unshaken quietness. "Donnell never got drunk in his life. He was married and had three kids. He saved his money and bought stockers for a small spread he's homesteading over west of the home ranch. That's why I sent him in town—he was dependable. I repeat it: Yo're a yellow bellied dog of a murdering liar."

Then he raised the glass to his lips and drank it, his eyes on Kelly's face. He had signed his death warrant. He knew it. He had known there wasn't a chance to talk his way free, and he

had chosen it this way; to go out; to take as many with him as possible.

"Well?" he inquired coldly. And let the glass drop to the floor, hand lying near the butt of his ancient six-shooter.

"No man," Mike Kelly got out hoarsely, "ever called me that and got away with it, Mister—"

Then a new voice cut into the room. "That one is going to do it, Kelly."

Not a man in the room moved, except for the twisting of a few necks. Every eye in the place went to the newcomer. Bates stood in the opened doorway now, half grinning; though back of the grin was the same kind of lazy coldness which Tolson had seen. His six-shooter lay low at his right hip.

"What were you saying, Mike?" he queried.

Buck King's hand reached down casually and withdrew his pistol from the chaps pocket, something like a dry chuckle coming from him. King seldom laughed. His life was wrapped up in the Circle K, running it efficiently, keeping everything in order, and devoting himself to his wife and two small children with whom he lived in a separate house at the home ranch.

"On second thought, Red," he said, "maybe I won't fire you after all for that little fracas in town this afternoon. But I was worried and rode in."

Rome Kennifer moved around the end of the bar. He padded toward the center of the room, authoritatively. "All right, boys, put 'em away," he ordered. "Drinks are on the house. I'll have no trouble in my place tonight."

"Mister," Buck King said levelly, "you just stand pat and don't say another word. I noticed you wasn't worrying about trouble a couple of minutes ago. *You* stand pat!"

KENNIFER stopped. Bates said, "We're bucking a stacked deck here in town, Buck. They killed Ed Harmon. I found his body this afternoon on the way to town. They'd buried him by pulling a cut bank down over his body but either the wind or water partly uncovered it. Then some gent who was a rotten shot tried to dry gulch me with a rifle and didn't quite make it. You'd better wire the Old Man and tell him either to get this herd out of here or get some gun help. Kennifer here buys the cows in Porterville. Two or three other buyers who came in just ain't around anymore. They took wings and flew away. Angels' wings, from the looks of things."

"Friend," Rome Kennifer said gently, "that's a pretty rugged statement to make in this town. It ain't healthy."

"Ain't it? I noticed it ain't a very healthy town in general for cowpunchers with trail herds."

"I'm not running," Buck King said to Kennifer. "If that's the way it is here, I'm still not running. I drove them cows four hundred miles across some bad country to ship them. I'm shipping them. I don't want a fight with a herd on my hands, but, by God, if it's a fight you want the Circle K don't back down. I'm not selling them critters to you, Kennifer, and I'm not turning them back. All right, Red, let's get out of here."

"Oh no you don't!" Tad Brown suddenly bristled, pushing forward with a show of bravado despite the fact he was still supporting a slight limp, memento of his fracas with the roan.

"The old roan wrestler himself," snickered Bates. "How's Queenie?"

"You keep her outa this!" roared the marshal, his face flaming as a nervous titter of laughter went around the room. "You're under arrest for disturbing the peace—"

"Cut it out," Red Bates advised calmly. "And after that lousy shooting

you did through the window of the station awhile ago, I'd ought to take the gun away from you again. You shot at me and hit Tolson. What you shoulda done," he went on with grim humor, "was shoot at Tolson. Then you'd a hit me."

"I don't know what yo're talking about!" snarled the marshal.

"Then you'd ought to go get that cut on your cheek fixed. Two of my shots at you up in the depot hit the window frame and tore splinters right and left, almost in your face. That cut ain't more than a half hour old. Blood has hardly stopped running. You're a hell of a fine example of a peace officer, but I think we can fix that when I get word to the sheriff to get some deputies down here. Come on, Buck."

King started toward the door. He didn't quite make it. For the bartender, at a signal from Kennifer, suddenly ducked, rose up again, and shot out the lights.

CHAPTER X

ALL hell broke loose in the darkness then. Somebody yelled hoarsely and there was the crash of an overturned card table as the three players went to the floor. A cigarette butt cut a glowing circle through the air as a man threw it. The front swinging doors split outward as a dark form plunged through to the safety of the street.

A gun flared almost on the spot where Mike Kelly had been standing. Bates thumbed a shot at the flash and ducked, not any too soon. Flame lashed out from three different parts of the room, and the bullets ripping through the wall. From over where Tad Brown had been standing another gun lashed fire—at the spot where King had been standing. The shot struck the bar mirror. It apparently slid down in a collapsing mass. Bates fired again as he leaped aside and heard the thud of a man's falling body.

One, he thought grimly.

"That's enough," called Kennifer's voice from somewhere in the room. "Cut out that shooting."

"Somebody put on a light," another voice whispered.

There was no shooting now. Every man in that darkened room was waiting. It was hard to tell where a whisper came from and Bates, now flat on the floor, gun up, called softly, "Buck."

"Keep quiet," came back the whisper, followed by the roar of a gun toward it. More flashes lit up the room and another man smashed at the swinging doors, rolling through sideways and off the porch under the hitch rail. He got up and his boots made hard running sounds down the street. Out there voices were shouting.

"Fight!" somebody yelled. "There's a gun fight in the Blue Bird. All the lights are out. Stay clear, men. Don't butt into anything that is none of your business."

Kennifer's voice, down back of the end of the bar, came in a shout to a man outside.

"That you, Pritchard?" he called.

"Yes," followed by the creak of carriage harness.

"Come in here and light one of the candles back of the bar. Nobody'll shoot you. Come in here. Hell broke loose. Somebody's been killed!"

"All right," came the big man's reply. "I'm coming in."

"And I'm coming with you, Dad," came in his daughter's excited voice. "I've always heard about these western gun fights. I want to see one."

"You stay right in that carriage, young lady! It's bad enough for you to be walking around these streets

alone at night without me having to pick you up and let you walk into a gun battle. You stay in that carriage."

His steps sounded on the porch—off to one side of the door. Then the "topper" edged into view around one side of the jamb.

"All right, you men in there," he snapped. "This is George Pritchard and I'm coming in to light a candle. No more shooting, understand?"

"Mister," came Buck King's voice from the opposite end of the bar, "you just stay right out there until we get this thing settled. Kelly, I know about where you are. When that light goes on I'll have a gun lined at your guts."

Mike Kelly's voice came in a snarl from twenty feet away. "And I know where you are, King. I'll shoot the minute that light goes on."

"So will I, Mike," Red Bates' whisper cut in. "Two to one. You haven't got a chance. I'll blow you to hell the moment you make a move."

KENNIFER'S voice then. "I said no more shooting. Goddlemighty, there's been enough trouble here to give this town a bad reputation! After this fracas tonight, if it isn't hushed up, we'll have this town full of Texas Rangers and deputy sheriffs. We don't want that kind of a town or that kind of a reputation. Mike, lower that gun of yours. If King says he won't shoot, then he won't. Tad, put that six-shooter away. Hell of a fine marshal you are. Can't even stop a fight, but have to join in. Put them guns away."

"All right," came the marshal's angry voice. "But I'm going to get Bates later on. He can go free tonight, but I'll get him."

"Not if I'm riding that roan horse of mine, you won't," came in a half snicker from the darkness. "And he told me a little while ago that the next time you tried to wrestle with him he was going to get real tough. Says you don't even know how to ride a good cow pony."

Somebody tittered and the laugh was echoed with Tad Brown's angry gurgle. The marshal, Bates knew, was boiling.

"All right, mister," Buck King called. "Come on in and light the candle. My gun's still got two shells in it, but I'm not shooting. Bates won't either. But the first man who makes a play will take a sliding trip into hell."

"Ike," called Kennifer's voice to the bartender, "tell Mr. Pritchard where the candles are but don't get up. Come in, George."

Pritchard's tall figure filled an outline in the doorway. Beyond it a dozen men were grouped in front of the family carriage. Kennifer said, "This way around the end of the bar but step over me. I'm on the floor."

Pritchard stepped over him, feeling his way along. Movement came from back of the bar and the bartender's voice said, "Here's the candle, Mr. Pritchard. Always keep 'em in a box right by the till. I'm holding it up above the bar."

"One moment," Pritchard replied.

Then a match flared. The yellow glow lit up the sideburns and long nose. He lit the candle, reached down for another, lit it from the first. Yellow light, thin and sickly but sufficient, drove darkness from the room.

The bartender was the first up, taking the candles. He began setting them in wax and lighting more. The doors swung inward and Rome Kennifer let out an angry roar.

"Nobody in here! Everybody keep outside and stay—oh, Miss Pritchard."

She stood there surveying the scene with calm eyes, and Bates, getting slowly and cautiously to his feet, had to admit that she was both beautiful and cool. A lovely woman. Her eyes swept

to King, now standing at the end of the bar. To Mike Kelly, over by the card table, now overturned. Kelly was on his knees, gun drooping. Tad Brown was crouched down along the wall, twenty feet from his original position. The man who had scratched himself—Yarren—had rolled all the way to the front and lay prone beneath a window, which looked in on the card tables.

One man of them all did not get up. He lay flat on his face, neck twisted at a queer angle, a pool of blood beside it.

Terrill had blotted his last brand and rustled his last calf. He had been shot squarely through the neck.

"Put up those guns—all of you!" Pritchard ordered.

THEY put up the guns, weapons making rustling sounds as iron was slid back into leather. Somebody said, "Whew!" and let go a long-drawn sigh. Kennifer got up and went behind the bar, stepping carefully over a million glass shards from his shattered bar mirror. The bare wall back of it glowed from the yellowy pine, still new looking. He began setting out bottles and glasses.

"It's on the house," he grunted. "Come on up and have a drink. And be damned sure you keep your hands above your waists. There's been enough shooting in here for one night."

Tad Brown limped over, past the body of the rustler Terrill on the floor. He stepped wide of the crimson pool.

"Who killed Terrill?" he demanded.

"Me," Bates said belligerently. "He ducked in line of fire when I shot at Kelly. Maybe I ought to give *you* my gun."

Brown's mustache bristled. "Maybe you ought. That was plain murder and you're going to answer for it."

"Killing Donnell was plain murder too but nobody has answered for it . . . yet," came the reply.

Alma Pritchard came along the line of tense men at the bar and looked at Bates. The half amused glint was in her clear eyes again. "So we meet again, cowboy?" she smiled.

"Yes *ma'm*," he grinned.

"For a person who's just shot a man, you're pretty calm about it."

"If he was with Mister Scratcher down there, who was getting ready to back Mike Kelly's frameup murder play, then I don't feel too sorry for him. He had it coming."

"You just naturally get into trouble, don't you? You're the kind."

"I'm always running from it, but I don't seem to run fast enough."

"I believe you're with this herd of cows that's causing all the trouble."

"Sometimes we call them cows, ma'm, but actually they're boy cows which don't like the girl cows anymore."

She went off into laughter, soft, rich, cultured. Rome Kennifer came down to the end of the bar. He looked at her.

"Would you like a drink, Miss Pritchard? I can offer you sherry."

She gave him a slight bow of the head. "That will be fine, Mr. Kennifer. Thank you very much. Are you coming to the house warming Friday night?"

"I am," he said gallantly, "and I'll expect you to dance with me."

"And you?" she asked, turning to Bates.

"I reckon not. I expect I'll kind of be taking an absentee leave from the job for awhile. For my health."

Kennifer came back with a dusty bottle and a thin glass. He poured for her. Pritchard, still back of the bar, followed. He stopped beside Kennifer as the saloon owner poured sherry

for himself. They tipped glasses.

"I thought," Pritchard said angrily to his daughter, "that I told you not to come in here, Alma."

"I know you did, darling." She reached over and caressed a sideburn. "He's such an old bear, Mr. Bates. But he's a good pappy. He's always saying that what I need is a good husband to tame me. But they all shy away because of his money."

She drank from the glass. Kennifer sipped and placed his on the bar, looking speculatively at King. King's whiskey glass lay before him, untouched.

"Not drinking?" he asked softly.

"Not until I find out what it's to be, Kennifer. One of your pack rats killed one of my men in cold blood. A peaceful family man who never got drunk. Two was his limit, except once in a while in the bunkhouse when somebody brought a quart or two home to the ranch. But Bates squared up tonight. He killed one of yours. That makes it even. If you want to call it quits, I'm willing. But I brought a herd to Porterville to ship it east and I'm going to do it, come hell or high water. What's the answer, Kennifer? I'm ready to square off all bets after tonight."

BUT Rome Kennifer slowly shook his head. Bates, standing there watching him, suddenly realized that this man had a kind of character not visible at a first glance. In his late thirties or so, Kennifer might have grown a trifle heavy around the middle, but there was something almost pantherish in the set of his muscular neck, the piercing black eyes, and the glossy black hair. Dressed up, he'd make a handsome man. A strong, rugged man to command admiration from women.

He shook his head again. "I'm sorry, King, but it's got to be the other way. I can't let you get away with it. If you got by with this—if word got around that a cow outfit had made Rome Kennifer back down—every trail crew that came in here would try the same thing. We've got to let them know what kind of a place Porterville is."

"I think," Red Bates said softly, "that they're finding out."

Kennifer looked at him steadily, then back to King. He shook his head a third time. "You see, King, I came here in my early twenties, fifteen years ago. I'm thirty-eight now. Porterville was a collection of two dozen shacks on a trail herd route further north. I set up my first saloon in a tent. Most people probably think that a saloon isn't exactly a respectable business. I never did. Liquor is as much of a necessity to hard-working cowmen as groceries. There wasn't any law here then, so I kind of took it upon myself to keep down trouble. Porterville got to be known as Rome Kennifer's town; a place where they treated you right but wouldn't stand for trouble."

He paused and took a sip of the sherry. The line of men at the bar was silent. A dozen heads peered over the tops of the swinging doors. The girl Alma had her eyes riveted on the man's not unhandsome face. Bates waited, siding King, and a little impressed. It was probably all true. So far.

"I loaned money to broke cow punchers," Kennifer went on, his voice almost gentle, "I sold them whiskey on credit, I fed them. Few ever failed to pay me back. I made friends by the dozens and then by the hundreds. A lot of them today are pretty high up. When the railroad boom hit it was me, paying money out of my own pocket to five town marshals, who kept the peace. I simply sent word to the sheriff that we didn't want any of his

deputies down here and not to send them. He didn't send them. He knew Rome Kennifer. If Kennifer said he could run the town, then it was that much less worry for the sheriff, who's old and owes his last three terms to my influence. I sent out word to vote for him and he was elected. No deputies here."

He took another sip at the sherry. Red Bates looked down at his own untouched glass, then up at Kennifer. The glint had come back into his blue eyes again.

"Sounds pretty impressive so far," he commented. "But I can take up the story from there. The boom hit and you got ideas. You figured that if you could take over the market here, push out competitive buyers, you'd get rich overnight. So you set out to do it the only way you know: backed up by the guns of the men you hired. If you could bluff out the cattlemen, scare them, make them sell to you or not let a cow go through here, you'd be a millionaire overnight. That's why Tolson the agent supposedly never got the letter Jake Kromper wrote him, asking for cars. It's why he refused to send the telegram for cars tonight, though he was going to send one for Mr. Pritchard."

King turned slowly, looking at the big man. Pritchard had lit a long cigar and was rolling it speculatively in his fingers, whiskey glass in the other hand. "Where do you fit into the picture?" King asked him bluntly.

"Exactly where I should, Mr. King," the girl's father replied. "I came here a few months ago to put up a packing plant. I figured it would be cheaper to ship canned meat out of here rather than on the hoof. And I could get choice pick of the cattle first. I deal in meat, both canned and on the hoof. Kennifer was in business here with a ranch of his own just four miles south and west of town in Gyp Valley. Plenty of water from wells and plenty of good grass. He offered to furnish me with all the beef I needed. I accepted the proposition. It meant that all worries on that score were off my hands. That's the way the proposition stands. If you've a quarrel with Kennifer, that's your and his affair, I'm sorry to say. That's all."

"So it's a fight to the finish?" Buck King asked Kennifer.

"I'm afraid so. But I might make an exception in your case on one condition."

"Name it."

"Turn this man Bates over to the law to be tried for killing one of my men."

"You," Buck King said levelly, "can go to hell."

CHAPTER XI

POKE McGEE came in about that time, through the back door, not quite on the point of rocking on his heels. He looked at the dead man still on the floor and let go an alcoholic snort.

"I've been a key pōundin' boomer on every new line in the west," he announced to nobody in particular. "I hit every boom town where there was a railroad. And they're all the same. Somebody gets shot. Hello, cow punch," he greeted Bates.

"Come up and have a drink on Kennifer," Bates grinned. "He's buying."

"What happened—ain't he feelin' well?" Poke demanded suspiciously.

"He might be a little sick but he'll get over it. You want a job?"

Poke had picked up Bates' untouched drink and had it half way down. He spewed out liquor and began to cough. "Hell no!" he exploded angrily. "Think

I'm a blamed fool? Every time I see a cow punch walking down the street I git pains where I shouldn't just thinking about straddling a hoss. I'm a telegraph operator."

"That's what I was talking about. We haven't got one in Porterville anymore."

"What happened to that squint-eyed son of a railroad tie Tolson?" he demanded, picking up King's drink.

"He had a sort of accident. Tad Brown tried to salivate me up at the station a little while ago and shot Tolson instead. He—"

A struggle ensued at the bar. Three bodies went writhing across the floor before Mike Kelly and Yarren, holding an arm, got control of the marshal. "I'll kill him!" he panted. "Let me loose, Mike. I'll blow his head off right now."

Poke rocked back and surveyed the struggling, flaming faced man. "Drunk again," he snorted. "Never saw a man who could take so few and git blotto so quick. Him and his drinkin' while his pore hard working wife—"

"Shut up!" screamed the marshal, struggling anew.

"While his pore little wife worked like a slave. I passed the window of their house just now, across the alley back of the cafe. There she was, cooking up a big supper for him. I says to her, I says, 'Miz Brown, you cooking supper?' And she says as how she's cookin' a make up supper for pore Tad. They had a big fight over you kissing her in the kitchen when you got in, but I think she come out the best of it. She had on a purty blue dress to—"

Laughter went down the bar and Tad Brown began to curse. Alma Pritchard looked up at Bates, now slightly red in the face. "Well, well," she murmured demurely. "So that's the kind of a man you are? I don't know about that party. You might even—"

"You'll be perfectly safe with me, ma'am," he grinned, and then turned to King. "I reckon we'd ought to be going, Buck. It's been a busy day. Where's your horse? Out front?"

At King's nod Bates added, "You go out and get him. I'll get mine out back. Wait for me on the road south of town."

"Where are you going?" snapped the foreman.

"Don't worry about me, I'll be along." He turned to the bartender as King went past a now quiet but scowling marshal, still gripped by the two men. "Give me a quart. Best you've got in the house."

He laid a gold piece on the bar and Alma Pritchard stuck out a slim hand. "More business with the ladies," she mocked, her eyes dancing. "And I thought all you cowboys were afraid of a woman. I'm almost afraid of you."

He grinned noncommitaly, touched his hat and went out to the roan. Across from the cafe, Poke had said. He saw the house a few yards away and led the roan around back of it, slipping the quart under his arm into a saddle bag. Then he went into the kitchen to where Queenie was busy cooking . . . biscuits.

"Why, Reddie!" she exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

"Why, I came to see you, honey," he chuckled. "Your husband is over in the Blue Bird next door and I dropped by to help. Here, lemme finish them biscuits."

He shoved both hands into the flour bin and then turned to her, his eyes very, very soft indeed. "Ah, honey," he pleaded, and took her in his arms.

"Red! Reddie!" she squealed. "You mustn't—mmphh. . . ."

He stepped back and whirled her around, supposedly to admire her. The

blue dress made a nice imprint of his hands. He reached into the flour bin again. Then his right hand made a hard smacking sound on a certain fleshy part of her anatomy, leaving a beautiful white print against the blue. She squealed with laughter and ran coyly into the other room. He took the six shooter from his shirt front, laid it beside the dough pan, and went to the door.

"All right," he called in pretended sulkiness, "if you don't love me any more I'm going to leave. Goodbye."

He hit the roan and loped off into the night, gleefully picturing the marshal's return home in a few minutes. That supper was supposed to be a *peace offering*.

"Oh, well," Red Bates grinned. "Poke said she got the best of the other one. She can probably do it again. Come along you galloping glue pot. We've got business."

That blue dress, he thought, had certainly been swell for the flour prints on her shoulders and one side of her hefty buttocks.

Bates whooped and set spurs to the horse, drumming down the road at a run.

HE FOUND King waiting uneasily for him a half mile south of town and slowed the heaving roan to a jog trot. They fell in side by side at a trot until the mount Bates rode got its second wind and then set out at a lope once more. Neither spoke much. King was busy with the new problem. He'd brought a herd to Porterville to ship it and found the way barred. He had nine men to buck Rome Kennifer and an unknown number of gun hands the man had on his town payroll and his ranch.

They dropped down the arroyo past where Ed Harmon lay buried, Bates pointing out the location, and then rode on into camp. It was still pretty early in the evening and most of the men sat around the fire talking and smoking. There had been some grumbling at Buck King's dictum that no man was to leave for town that night. They were thirsty and anxious for a few drinks.

The two rode up and dismounted, leading their horses over to unsaddle. Bates dumped his gear on the ground and tucked the quart inside his shirt front. Out in the night a couple of the men rode circle around the dark mass that was the bedded down herd. The two men came to the fire and Cortez put down his guitar. He had been singing softly in Spanish; love songs of the border and the deserts of Old Mexico.

Mutton Chop looked up expectantly at Bates, almost licking his lips.

"You was late enough getting back," he said belligerently.

"Busy in town. Had a few drinks, went to a dance and met four pretty girls—"

"Yas? You was probably too busy to think of what you went for."

"Not at all, dearie, not at all," the red headed one said airily. "Why, I didn't even take a drink until I went right up to the depot to see about them cars. Was there something you thought I forgot?"

The cook began to squirm uneasily. He wet his lips. "I saved you some supper," he finally offered, lumbering to his feet. "If you'll just come around to the back of the chuckbox, why I'll—"

"Oh, don't bother. I ain't hungry. I ate in town."

As a matter of record, his stomach was crawling right up against his backbone. He could have eaten a dried bull hide.

"Maybe some of that cake with the peaches on top," Mutton Chop said solicitously, fighting down both anger and impatience. For a man anxious to feed a puncher, his eyes had what was developing into a very angry look. Mutton Chop, never a slow tempered individual, was about ready to explode. The eyes had spotted the bulge in Bates' shirt front. Something like a fuming noise went out of the cook's flaring nostrils.

"I wouldn't think of it," Bates replied modestly, in answer to the offer of the cake. "I ate my share just before going into town. Good range etiquette says as how a man shouldn't make a hawg of himself. You save it and eat it yourself."

He sat down on a box and reached for cigarette papers and tobacco. That was a little more than the irate cook could stand. "Come around here on the other side of the wagon!" he roared. "I got somethin' confidential like I want to talk to you about."

"Why, sure, cookie," Red Bates replied, rising to his feet. "Oh, by the way, I knew there was something I almost forgot. Here's that bottle of red eye I promised to bring you back from town."

He removed the quart from his shirt and handed to the now apoplectic cook, whose neck had turned to a beautiful crimson hue. "Best in town, Mutton Chop," Bates said. "Just like I promised. Now let's go around and talk about what you wanted."

"Go to hell!" Mutton Chop almost bawled. "You would have to act the dam' fool and hand it to me—"

KING'S crisp voice cut in from across the fire. "Open it, Mutton Chop," he commanded. "Red did what was right. If he'd a slipped you that quart you'd have got pie-eyed tonight and this is no time to get pie-eyed. Matter of fact, I intended to bring back a bottle for you boys from town, knowing you'd want a few drinks, but too many things happened. Pull the cork on it and pass it around. When it's empty I've got a few things to say. Hell is popping for us. Boys, it looks like we've got a first class war on our hands against a lot more men."

The glare went out of Mutton Chop's eyes. He went to the back of the chuck box. Ace Sampson shifted his seat on his saddle. He was slim, dapper and dark, and about the age of Red Bates. Pug Carson, snub-nosed as his name indicated, asked, "What's up, Buck?"

"I'll tell you in a minute."

From back of the chuckwagon came a loud *plop* as the cork came free, followed by a long gurgling sound. The cook came back, wiping his lips on a sleeve. He smacked them in satisfaction, handed the bottle to Pug. "That's what puts life in a man's bones," he said. "And right you was, Reddie. It's good liquor."

"Fine. Now how about that supper? I was so busy ducking bullets in town I didn't have time to eat. I'm starved. Any rocks in the beans?"

That one brought a rise from Mutton Chop Beasley. "Yas, and hopes you busts a tooth. The boys blamed *me* for it. It's a danged good thing you wasn't here for grub. They'd a tied you in a bedroll and dragged you all the way into the sinks."

Bates went back and stood at the chuck board, hungrily devouring cold steak, beans, potatoes, and cold biscuits. He ate until he felt ready to burst, after which he still found room for a generous hunk of the disputed cake. All the time the low voice of Buck King was talking to a ring of silent men. A few asked questions. King answered them. There was talk

of sending to the Old Man for more help, but this brought a negative shake of the head from the foreman.

"We need 'em now. Kennifer isn't a man to waste time. The gauntlet had been laid down. We're putting a herd through, he says we ain't. We either sell to him or, I think, we get raided. Maybe rustled. I want all you boys to ride with your carbines on the saddle from now on. Get 'em out tonight and sleep with 'em. I don't think they'll try that soon, but we ain't taking any chances."

He reached for the bottle, held it up to the light of the lantern hanging from a wire hook on the side of the wagon. "There's just enough left for the two men out with the herd. I—"

A horse came up at a walk and Sonuvagun, the Cherokee Indian night wrangler, coming in for coffee, slid to the ground. He was booted, in levis, checkered shirt, and wore a flat brimmed high crowned hat with a bright beaded band above two plaids of coarse black hair down his back. His eyes caught the bottle and sparkled.

King handed it to him. "One good one, Sonuvagun, and that's all," he said. "How's the horses?"

"All right. Graze out there."

Bates came around the corner of the chuckwagon, toothpick in his mouth, and rolling a smoke. He sat down again on the box.

"What about the cars?" Ace asked. "We get 'em all right?"

KING shook his head and told of the killing of the crooked agent, obviously taking orders from Kennifer. "They never were wired for. That's why there was no letter at Cedar Flats. You had a hundred and twenty mile ride for nothing. But I think we'll have the order through by tomorrow —if Poke McGee sobers up tonight."

"So we stay right here and stand fast over the herd, eh?"

King nodded, gazing half moodily into the fire. He took a glowing brand from the ground, lit his smoke, and carefully laid it back. Sparks shot up and faded into darkness, blending to nothingness.

"What's Red going to do?" Hank Watson asked from across the fire. "Seems to me him salivating one of Kennifer's men—"

"Red," the foreman said, "is going to stick right close to this wagon, out in the open where he's free from ambush. They tried it once on him. They'll try it again."

"Red," Bates said calmly, "ain't going to do anything of the kind. Red has got business of his own."

"Such as?"

"I don't like being a sitting duck for a long range rifle. Plenty of chances for me to get it in the back by some man crawling up close. One of them could even catch the others away from the wagon and dash in on a horse. Nope, Buck. I figure it different. Tonight I'm leaving. I want some grub and extra cartridges and Ace's 45-90 repeater. Kennifer probably figures he'll bring in his men from the ranch and come out here to bust up the herd, or something. I figure that if things get kind of hot around *his* place, they'll be so busy hunting for me it'll relieve the pressure on you boys here."

Ace Sampson shot upright from his now reclining position. "You don't get the gun!" he announced. "I'm going with you, Red."

"Buck'll need all the help he's got right here with the herd. You give me enough cartridges and I'll make out. Sonuvagun, go out and get me that big long legged bay horse with the wire cut scar on his left shoulder. You

savvy which one?"

"Sure, Red. I catch him. Right pronto."

He finished the last of his coffee with a loud swallowing sound and went to his horse, swinging up. He loped into the night and Red Bates rose to look for his bedroll. Pug Carson and Ace got up.

"About time to relieve Shorty and Jim," Ace said, yawning. "Dog-gone but I'd like to roll in and sleep for a week. Come on, Pug, let's get our night horses. That gun is in the wagon, Red. You'll find three hundred rounds of cartridges."

Bates said so-long and went back to help Mutton Chop, who was filling a flour sack. He carried the sack and roll out to his saddle, tied them on, and came back for the 45-90. Presently the Cherokee rode up leading the bay.

Five minutes later Red Bates was ready to go. He rode over, said, "See you boys later," and jogged off into the night, southwest toward where Pritchard had said Kennifer's ranch lay.

The picture of Mary Ann Atlee came to his mind again, and almost at once there was superimposed upon it Alma Pritchard's lovely face with the amused glint in her clear eyes.

He rode on, humming softly.

CHAPTER XII

DAWN broke over Porterville the next morning, clear and cool, presaging another warm fall day. On the east side of town Rome Kennifer arose shortly after the sun was up and dressed. The house was a big white frame affair, well furnished, and contained a surprisingly large number of good books. Kennifer was an inveterate reader. He got up yawning from the big bed and went into the bathroom, bathed himself, and dressed in a pair of new boots, black trousers, clean white shirt, and a new tie.

Both bath and the new clothes were a bit on the unusual side for this early in the day, particularly the bath. But since last night, when he had leaned over the bar sipping sherry with Alma Pritchard's lovely face so close, strange things had begun stirring within him. He had always entertained the thought that someday he should marry. Women had, in the past, meant little in his life. An occasional affair only. So, in fact, that he refused to let the ones of the courtesan variety work in the Blue Bird.

But, Kennifer thought, as he left the house unlocked for the woman who came in days to put it in order, things had changed since last night. He was somewhat amazed that he hadn't thought about it before. Pritchard was a big man, a financier in fact, who was settling permanently in Porterville, and even intended purchasing himself a ranch later on. With such a business agreement, and the prospect of a million dollars in the offing, what more than that he, Kennifer, should bind the ties closer by marriage to Pritchard's daughter?

The fact that he was about to engage in a ruthless war of cattle versus cars with a trail herd outfit bothered him little, as far as the girl was concerned. Kennifer knew that George Pritchard hadn't exactly been a Good Samaritan in his rise to wealth and power. This was something a girl like Alma could understand.

Instead of being revolted by the idea she would, in all likelihood, be drawn to him the more for it. She was the daughter of a powerful man. She would marry no other kind.

He stopped by the barbershop to get his black cheeks shaved to a clean blue, settling himself comfortably in

the chair. The barber, a wizened, aged, bald headed little man, nodding a greeting and reached up to the shelf of mugs.

"Quite a little ruckus in town last night, eh, Kennifer?" the barber said, taking down a brown one with Kennifer's name on it. He poured in hot water on top of the soap and began to mix lather.

"Quite," Rome Kennifer said, absently.

He wasn't in the mood for idle talk this morning. Too many things were filling his mind. The girl Alma mostly, for he was on the verge of doing something he'd never done in his life: He was day dreaming romantically.

He raised his head up in the chair enough to look at his face and the glossy black hair. The face pleased him. He liked the strong reflection the mirror gave back.

"Too bad about poor Tolson," the barber said. "A good man."

"Too bad."

THE steaming towel came down over his face, coiled over it, and the barber's fingers made a hole for his nose. The towel warmed Rome Kennifer, made him feel better. His mind leaped from the girl to the red headed cow puncher who had so brashly upset things. He'd made a fool out of Tad Brown, killed Terrill in a gun fight in which everybody concerned had got off very lucky indeed, and stood by while Buck King refused to be bluffed.

So Bates would have to go. That would be a job for Frank Yarren with his big rifle. Or Lin Davis. As for the others of the Circle K crew, Kennifer had twelve hard bitten riders out at his ranch, plus a number of men in town who would jump when he snapped the whip. The law gave him no concern. He would send word to the sheriff to keep clear and the sheriff would keep clear.

The cars posed a problem. If the railroad sent them in and they weren't used, there just might be complications; but none Kennifer felt he couldn't meet and overcome.

The towel came off his face and the barber began to lather, working the rich white foam into the dark whiskers. He shook his head dolefully.

"And that old fellow Terrill. I always kind of liked him. Never had much to say. Never packed a gun. Never bothered nobody. A fine man, Mr. Kennifer. Kind of a pity that an old timer like him who'd worked hard all his life should be shot down by a tough cow puncher like that Bates. Something ought to be done about it."

"I wouldn't worry, Ed," Kennifer said. "Those fellows don't last. Sooner or later he'll meet some man a little better with a gun than he is and that will be boothill for Bates."

"I guess you're right. The bad kill off the bad. Makes for a better country."

That one brought a hidden smile from Rome Kennifer. He was honest enough to admit that from a strictly ethical point of view Bates had done the country a good turn by accidently shooting a man who had been a cattle rustler and general thief all his life.

He got out of the chair, surveyed himself in the mirror, adjusted his hat and went out. It was but a short distance from the barber shop across the street to the Town Cafe and Kennifer headed that way for his usual breakfast of ham and eggs.

Mike Kelly was sitting on a stool as he came in. Kelly looked up, nodded a short good morning, and went back to his coffee.

"You don't look so good," Kennifer commented.

"I don't feel so good," growled Kel-

ly. He was about twenty-eight with big shoulders and had a hard, flat mouth. His eyes were a peculiar flecked green that went well with his blonde hair.

"Livery not doing so well?" the saloonman asked pleasantly, for he was in a pleasant mood. "Maybe you're mad about that two dollars and feed bill you lost on Bates' roan when it spilled Tad into the street. If I hadn't been so disgusted, I'd have laughed right out loud."

"It's not that," grunted Kelly. "It's Atlee. I met him last night after the fracas. Going about his business as usual, but you always get the impression that that little terrier knows everything about you. He's got a way of looking at a man out of them shrewd eyes of his that makes you sore."

"Oh, now I get it. Mary Ann, eh?"

KELLY stirred savagely at his coffee for a moment. Then he half nodded. "He was coming down the street. Right in the middle of the boardwalk he stopped me by blocking my path. He said, 'Kelly, you might be a bad man to a lot of people in this town but where my daughter is concerned, you don't look tough to me. Mary Ann told me a few minutes ago that on the way home you tried to walk with her. I warned you once before. This is the last time.' He said, 'If you ever speak to her again, or molest her in any way, I'll come gunning for you. That's why I came hunting you just now.' He meant it, too, Rome. Had his hand under his shirt front all the time he was talking."

"Well," Kennifer said placatingly, "there could be something done about it, Mike. I'll think it over. Right now we've got other business on hand. This morning I want to—"

The back door beyond the curtains opened and closed with a slam. There was something angry in the sound. A growl came from the kitchen and Queenie's voice snapped, "If you want a cup, get it yourself!"

"Bring me one too, Tad," Kennifer called.

Tad Brown presently came in with two steaming cups. He had a black eye. Queenie came in to take Kennifer's order. She had a black eye, too.

"We heard the battle last night clear over in the Blue Bird—about ten minutes after Bates left and you went home," Rome Kennifer smiled. "Nothing like a good scrap now and then to keep love blooming. What was this about?"

"Nothing," growled the marshal sullenly.

"Then," Kennifer said, "I'd certainly hate to see you two mix it up when there was something. I thought maybe it was about expenses in the cafe. Lot of hollering about flour—"

"It wasn't how *much* flour, it was *where* it was," snapped the marshal, glowering at his spouse.

"He's just jealous, Rome, that's all. Bates only brought back Tad's gun like he said he would. Came by the kitchen for a minute and left it—"

"If it took a minute to get them flour hand prints of hisn on your back and on your behind, then I'm danged glad he didn't stay any two minutes," half yelled the representative of law and order in Porterville. "I can't trust this woman a foot out of my sight. She's the—"

"Oh, yes? Then what about *you* mooning around Mary Ann Atlee before you got told off and come wheedling back to me, you slab-sided—"

"Come off, come off," Kennifer cut in. "If you two are going to start round two this morning, let me have some breakfast first. The usual, Queenie. Ham and eggs."

He understood the situation perfectly. Quite a number of times during the past two months, while Tad Brown was busy, Queenie had been up at his house when Queenie was supposed to be home. Queenie was a lusty woman.

She went back to fill the order and the Blue Bird's owner grew serious, his mind automatically turning to business once more. "I want to see both of you over in the saloon right after breakfast," he said. "We've got a lot to talk over."

"All right," Kelly replied. "I expect that the Circle K will be getting its cars though, Rome. When I crossed over the tracks from my shack a few minutes ago Poke McGee was back of the operator's desk. Cold sober. Busy as a beaver cleaning up the mess left by Tolson when they packed him away. Stuck his head out the window and grinned like a monkey. Said he'd opened the key, got the division super on the wire, explained what had happened, and now has a job. Temporarily, at least. He said he wired for the cars."

"Never mind. They'll have to bring them in from the division point and that's two hundred miles. They might not even have them on hand. At any rate, it'll take a couple of days at the least. I think that's all the time we'll need."

HE FINISHED his breakfast, drained the last of a second cup of coffee, paid and went next door, Kelly and the marshal heeling him like well trained hounds. The day bartender had the place open and was sweeping out. The swamper had quit two nights before and Kennifer hadn't been able to get another. Kennifer nodded a good morning and looked at the stain on the floor where Terrill had lain. The fresh bullet holes made him frown. That one last night had been bad. Damned bad.

"Come on back to the back room," he ordered; and to the bartender: "Joe, see if you can find a swamper today. Hire anybody you can. Get some new lamps, bigger ones if the hardware store has them. Tell them I want a new mirror installed by this afternoon sure. This place looks like it's been hit by a twister."

"All right," Joe replied. "But it'll take hot water and lye soap to get that stain off the floor, and my job don't call for that, Rome. I'll try to get a man. You going to be around today?"

"Not too much. I've got some riding to do. If anybody asks, tell them you don't know where I went."

"Cattle business, eh?" the bartender laughed and winked.

Kennifer closed the door and leaned against the wall. His black eyes took in Tad Brown's face. They began to chill. "I didn't get a chance to get an explanation out of you last night as to why you bungled that job at the depot," he said coolly. "I don't pay for failure, Tad. Let's have it."

"Aw, hell, Rome," expostulated the marshal uncomfortably. "It was a fluke, nothing more. The minute we got back inside the saloon after that dam' mean roan spilled me you said follow Bates and get him after dark. I hit out and was all over town before I got a hunch and went to the depot. I met Gabe Summers on the way. He said Bates was there, all right, with Pritchard. Well, I was a little leery about shooting him down with Pritchard but figured it would let him know what kind of men he was among and that we mean business. So I slipped up to the window with my gun out. Then that danged frozen-faced Englishman butler or whatever the devil he is—maybe a footman, I don't know—let out a squawk. He was outside in the carriage, holding Pritchard's team. Just as I shot at Bates

he wheeled like a cat and dropped. I saw Tolson go down, and the next thing I know about three slugs almost tore the window sill away within two inches of my face. They drove a splinter an inch long in my cheek—all the way to the bone. So what could I do but get out?" he finished testily.

"That bungling," Kennifer told him that morning in the Blue Bird, "cost the life of the best brand blotter I ever got hold of. I've been months getting him. Terrill didn't have an equal anywhere when it came to working a brand over through a wet blanket or using a running iron. He could even take a cinch ring and hold it with two sticks and blot a brand until even Ed Harmon wouldn't have noticed."

"Well," cut in Kelly, "there's no use in crying over spilled milk. Tad bungled and Terrill got killed. What did you want to see us about?"

"I had a sudden flash of inspiration at breakfast," Kennifer said. "It's sixty miles to the county seat and there's no train or telegraph running in there. I want you to get a good man, put him on the fastest horse you've got, and have him get to the sheriff with a message from me."

"Confidential? That is, anything Tad and me shouldn't know?"

"I want a deputy down here pronto. A man who will obey orders and ask no questions. Then we're going out and make Red Bates 'lead' us to the body of Ed Harmon. I never liked Atlee either. He's been a little too critical of me here in town and the one man who wasn't afraid to say so in public. That little cuss don't scare."

"You're telling that to me," muttered Kelly. "I'd have salivated him by now, but the girl might find it out."

"The girl is your affair. Atlee is mine. I had it in mind when we framed that letter and mailed it from Mud Flats, supposedly from Ed Harmon. Now it turns out that Atlee got a letter from a man who was already dead. That man asked him to go over and pick up the belongings he 'left' in his shack. You get the idea? I'm framing Atlee for Harmon's murder. Motive: robbery, or something. Maybe poker losses. Maybe to get Harmon's horse in Atlee's stable. We can make anything stick in court."

Kelly's thin mouth broke into a bright smile. He slapped Kennifer on the back. "Rome, you're a genius!" he exclaimed. "You always think ahead. I could use that stable of his *and* the girl, who won't have anybody left to protect her. I'll get a man up right away."

"All right. Tad, you stick around town and keep your eyes open for any Circle K men. If any come in—any except Bates or King—try to arrest them on any pretext. Throw them in jail. But don't start something you can't finish. I want to goad King into violent action. Make him start it, if possible. Arresting his men on any kind of ridiculous charge and holding them ought just about to fit the bill."

"Where you going?" asked Brown, fingering his mustache—on the opposite side from his black eye. Out to the ranch?"

"Naturally."

"Alone?"

Kennifer let go one of his rare smiles. He reached over and patted Brown on the shoulder with a fatherly hand. "No, little man. I have hopes that Miss Pritchard will do me the honor of accompanying me."

CHAPTER XIII

OTHERS too came astir that same warm morning in Porterville. In the big white mansion, newly finished

and still fresh with the smell of paint, Alma Pritchard awoke in her upstairs bedroom and stretched luxuriously in the big silken four poster bed covers. She yawned prettily and rang for the maid to bring up her coffee. She lay there for a few minutes, gazing out the south window at the flat stretch of mesquite studded Texas plain stretching away to the horizon. Down there, somewhere, was the trail herd up from the south. With them she supposed was the man she couldn't get out of her mind.

She still remembered that scene in the street when Tad Brown got up from the dust and was handed a six shooter. She recalled every expression on the face of the red headed cow puncher as the gun was shoved into his stomach and the hook hammer fell clicking on empty chambers. She remembered the contempt in his eyes as he turned his back and went to the horse.

The fight there in the saloon she wouldn't forget. Most of her life had been spent in Kansas City, with frequent trips to Chicago and New York, and this new life of the past few months intrigued her.

And so did these men who filled it. Most of them she saw with amused tolerance. Their "Yes ma'm" and "No ma'm" almost the gist of their conversation, left her smiling and bored. Bates had been different. One moment he spoke like a cow puncher. The next moment he spoke like a man of education. It was his brashness, his impudence in the face of danger which had so attracted her. She wondered if there couldn't be some excuse to ride out to Gyp Sinks to see him.

The colored maid brought in the coffee and she drank it in bed. "Anything worthwhile in the way of news, Lulu?" she asked.

"Some, I guess, Miss Alma," Lulu replied. "Everybody talking about that awful fight in town last night and you right in the middle of it. Your father done say at breakfast that he's goin' to have to send you back to Kansas City. Says first thing he know you'll be packing a gun yourself."

"Where is father?" she asked, getting out of bed.

"Edward done driv him over to the new plant. They say he goin' to start operating it next week. What you-all goin' to do today, Miss Alma?"

"I'm going to ride this morning, Lulu. Have one of the stable boys get my horse ready."

Lulu shook her dark head dubiously. "You go ridin' around this country all by yourself one of these bad cowboys goin' to pack you right off, you wait and see."

"Why, Lulu!" the girl laughed. "I'd love that! I'd love to be abducted by one of these cow punchers. Get my riding outfit out, will you? I'll grab a bite in the kitchen and go to the stable."

She emerged from the back door a half hour later and started across the broad new lawn toward the stables. As she left the gate a man on a black horse rode around and pulled up. Rome Kennifer doffed his black hat and smiled.

"Talk about luck," he said. "I was coming down to see you. Just saw you crossing the yard."

"Yes, I was on my way to the stable. I'm going for a ride."

His black eyes lit up. He swung to the ground and fell in beside her. "I am in luck this morning!" he exclaimed. "My ranch is about four miles from here, Miss Pritchard. Over there beyond that ridge. I've got to go out and see how things are coming along. Suppose you ride out with me and come back this afternoon? I can't promise that my bunk house cook's dinner will be up to what you've been used to. But he'll try something special for such a

lovely lady."

Flattery, she thought. It was crude but it was strong and direct. Like all these men out west. They thought straight, talked straight—and they shot straight.

"Why, I'll be glad to go, Mr. Kennifer," she replied. "And as for the dinner—think of sitting down at a table in a bunk house dining room and eating with real hard-working cowboys! I think it's a wonderful idea."

"Well," he smiled at her, "they're a pretty rough lot. So are their table manners. But if you'd like to meet some real cow hands, then it's a deal."

SHE got her horse and sent word to the house as to where she was going. They rode out across the flat and the town soon fell behind. A few arroyos loomed up and were crossed, the horses' hoofs sending little clods tumbling down the banks as they climbed out. He rode well for a man who had spent most of his life in Porterville as a businessman; but then, she thought, none of these westerners would walk twenty yards when there was a horse at hand.

They threaded their way through thick forests of mesquites for more than two miles and finally came out on the lip of a swale that was almost a valley. Gyp Valley, they called it, Kennifer said. A well-worn wagon road twisted across the low grassy land dotted with something like fifteen hundred head of cattle. About a mile ahead lay sinks, probably fed by the same underground stream as Gyp Sinks, now about three miles or so west of them.

But Kennifer had put up windmills and around the big steel troughs she saw dozens of cattle standing around, stomping and switching flies.

"Ever try to drink any gyp water?" he asked as they jogged along.

She shook her head.

"Then don't ever do it," he advised. "It'll take the hide off your throat. It's good only for stock. We had a new cook out here last year—some eastern bum who lasted three days—who tried to cook up a mess of beans with gyp water. He cooked them for three days and they were still as hard as iron. Each day the boys would tell him that the fire wasn't hot enough and that poor fellow would keep right on boiling away."

He threw back his head and laughed with her.

"How many men have you?" she asked. "I'm interested, you know. If Dad is going to buy a ranch later on, I suppose I'll have to learn something about the cow business. Maybe you could teach me something today."

"Maybe I could. You might as well get started today by meeting the boys. I've about a dozen. Lin Davis is the foreman. I have to warn you that they're not exactly lillies. This is no country for weak men."

She turned, letting her lazy eyes play over him. She smiled and the smile brought color to his blue jowls. "I noticed that last night," she murmured.

"I wanted to bring that up, Miss—hell, Alma. And you just call me Rome. As for last night, I was a little worried about what you might think."

"I? Why?"

He edged his black horse in closer with an offside rowell so that they rode almost knee to knee. "I was afraid it might make a bad impression on you—as far as I'm concerned. That business with Buck King."

He was paying court to her, she knew. She liked it. These men out here were different from the others she had known. Most of them were reticent to a point that was exasperating,

but the others who weren't—such men as Kennifer and that red-headed cow puncher—intrigued her. She knew instinctively that ultimately she was going to marry one of these western men, and the man who got her would have to prove himself.

"Well, you see," he explained, "on the surface that business last night might have thrown me in a bad light. It's man against man against the elements out here. Cattlemen—and I am a cowman, you know—have to fight the elements to raise their stuff and keep it going. Cow punchers ride in blinding sandstorms that cut their faces to pieces in spite of a bandana—"

"Oh, so that's why they wear them?" she cut in, delightedly. "I wondered about all these strange clothes they wear."

"Then I'll digress to explain. The hat keeps the sun off a man's neck and can be used to put over the eyes to blind a spooky or even bucking bronc. A cow pony won't move when he's blindfolded. The bandana also protects the neck and is used as a dust mask in a corral or, particularly, by trail herd riders working the swing, center, and even the drag. The vest has got a lot of extra pockets for tobacco and such. Chaps protect a man's legs from thorns while he's slamming through the mesquites trying to head off a cow. Ditto the *tapideros* over the stirrups. *Tapideros* were originated by the Mexican *vaqueros* working cactus and mesquite country."

"You forgot the boots. I hardly see how they manage to walk in them. And don't forget the spurs."

HE SMILED with enjoyable tolerance. "The high heels on boots keep a man from letting his foot slide through the stirrup. A sudden buck or lunge of a horse might shoot a man's foot through the stirrup, and then when he's thrown the horse will either drag or kick him to death. Spurs control a mount in many ways. They keep a horse going. Or, if a man is topping a bronc, quite often the animal will try to fling himself against the pole sides of a corral to crush the rider's leg. It changed its mind when the rider begins hooking it up around the neck, which is a sensitive spot. And, of course spurs serve one more purpose: they're the best thing in the world to hook into a cinch and hang on for dear life when a bronc cuts loose and tries to throw his rider."

"Well!" she exclaimed. "This *has* been a revelation! I never dreamed they were so practical. I thought they were . . . picturesque. One thing you left out—why they all wear a pistol, and once I saw a man wearing two. But I think I had a very practical lesson last night as to why men wear revolvers in this country."

"Just off hand," he smiled at her, "I'd say you did. You'll notice that all the men wore only one. Not one man in a thousand can handle two guns effectively. You're going to meet one today who does. He's my foreman, Lin Davis."

"Why does Lin Davis wear two?" she asked.

He shook his finger at her and his head too, smiling. "Lin Davis is my foreman and a good one. He draws one hundred dollars a month for keeping tough riders in line. Why he wears two is his business and not mine."

"Davis? Wasn't he the man who—"

"Men who pack two guns," he cut in, almost shortly, "are generally a target for every drunken cow puncher hunting trouble. To kill a 'two-gunman' enhances a tough cow puncher's badman reputation. Makes people fear him. Some of them love it. Yes, Lin killed

a man here in town some time back. We have to live that way. But I'm glad you're not so horrified about it as I was afraid you'd be. You belong out here with the rest of us, Alma. You're going to like it. Of course, there's trouble brewing, as you know from last night. It's got to be a fight to a finish between these cowmen like King and men like your father and myself. He and I are literally pardners."

She rode on for awhile, thoughtfully. They crossed over a dirt dam where rains had backed up water—another precaution all ranchers took, she learned. There were, he said, lots of catfish in the tank and promised to take her fishing.

"No," she said after a time, "I'm not horrified. I don't like it at all, I admit. I'm a woman, you know. But I'm not horrified because I'm practical. In the first place, it's none of my business. Secondly, I couldn't stop it if I tried. Thirdly, it would be foolish of me to make the attempt. And then too, Rome, I realize that this country is going through a process of evolution. Porterville is now the biggest town in the county, far overshadowing the county seat. Dad says that every so often people have the right to vote and see if they want to move the county seat. He added that in time it will be moved here to Porterville, with law and order and no more gun fights. Porterville is growing."

"Growing!" he exulted. "It's almost booming, but it's good and healthy. Yes, it's growing and your father and I are growing right along with it. We've got plenty of plans together, your father and I, Alma."

A half mile away the ranch buildings loomed up. She saw a low rambling house of rugged construction with another sturdy structure off to the west about one hundred yards. That, she guessed, was the bunkhouse where the men lived and ate. The corrals lay a short distance south. Almost by them was another of the windmills with its sheet iron trough.

"Tell me," she said at length, "if this gyp water is so bad, where do you get water to drink and with which to cook?"

"That's an easy one. We have gutters on the ranch and bunkhouses to catch rain water, troughing it into cisterns."

"But suppose it doesn't rain?" she persisted.

HE LET his black eyes play over her admiringly. "See that big wooden wagon out back with all the barrels in it? We haul from one of the tanks with the dirt dams. The one where I said the catfish are."

"But it looked muddy. Roiled by cattle."

"Sure. But in a few days it all settles to the bottom and is as clear as a crystal."

They rode up to the ranch house first and dismounted, going up the four steps of the long veranda. He showed her through the place with its rough furniture, cow hide rugs on the floors, its big but comfortable rawhide chairs.

"It's rough but comfortable," he said in the kitchen, handing her the water dipper. The water was clear and cold from the cistern. "That's some of the muddy water from the tank," he added, smiling.

"A nice place but it needs a woman's touch."

"So I've been thinking," he answered boldly.

She dropped her eyes demurrly. "Then you should find one. I'm sure that a man of your station could crook his finger at almost any woman in the country and she'd be happy to

come running."

"Maybe," he admitted modestly. "But no ordinary woman for Rome Kennifer. Come on, I'll take you out to the bunkhouse. It's nearly noon and most of the boys were working around the ranch today. They'll be in."

She walked out with him, flicking her riding crop. Several men lounging on a bench got up awkwardly and removed their hats as she and Kennifer approached. "Put 'em on, boys," Kennifer said. "This is Miss Pritchard and you'll probably be seeing her again. Where's Lin?"

"Inside," said one.

She glanced over them, the half amused glint in her eyes brightening. They were obviously uncomfortable. She noticed, too, that every man of them wore a gunbelt. She would have been not shocked, but a little excited, had she known that standing before her were men who had stolen other men's cattle, killed with both rifle and pistol —sometimes from behind—, and that three of them were wanted for stage robberies.

They went inside to the room where the men ate. She saw a long board table with benches on each side and, through an open door of the lean-to, an aproned man busy over the stove. Through another door were bunks, mostly unmade, saddle gear, rifles leaning in corners.

A MAN sat at one end of a bench smoking a cigarette. He got up as they came in and Kennifer said, "Hello, Lin. Thought I'd drop out and see the boys. Big business on hand. This is Miss Pritchard."

Davis nodded a curt acknowledgement of her bow. He was the man, all right. She saw a face that might have been thirty, with a week's growth of sandy whiskers. He was of medium build, wide shoulders for a man of his height, and he still wore the heavy gunbelts at his middle, the sheaths tied around the legs of his levis with leather thongs. Now she remembered: He'd been in town yesterday too.

It was his eyes, however, which held her. They were friendless, opaque blue, brittle, unemotional. Here, she thought, is a dangerous man. Here is a man who would kill at quick provocation.

"Dinner about ready?" Kennifer asked.

"In a minute."

"Have the cook hurry it up. I want to talk business. And Miss Pritchard will eat with us today."

"All right," Lin Davis said.

They sat down to the steaming meal fifteen minutes later. She spoke to Kennifer and tried to bring in some of the others, but with little success. They said, as usual, "Yes ma'm," and "No, ma'm," and went on with their food, some shoveling in mashed potatoes with a knife.

Then Kennifer began to talk. He talked as though she were not present, and the thought came to her that he did so because one day in the not too distant future he expected her to be a part of the ranch and his life in Porterville. She ate and listened.

"That red-headed cow puncher, eh?" one of them finally remarked to Rome Kennifer. "Me and Olie was playin' cards last night at the table when the ruckus broke. If I'd a knowed it was that way, I'd a dealt myself a hand. As it was, I hit that front door like a streak of lightnin'."

"Don't under-estimate that Circle K outfit," Kennifer warned them all sharply. "Kromper is known all up and down the Rio country. King is no fool. He's got brains and after last

night he's got plenty of cold g—courage. And that Bates gent has got me worried. Something about that name is plaguing me. I can't get it through. I've heard it before. Probably from last spring when he dragged Tad Brown through the mud puddle. But Bates is dangerous. Maybe he's with his outfit and maybe he isn't. He might be on the loose."

Lin Davis swallowed the last of the peach cobbler. He hadn't spoken a word during the entire meal. Now he looked first at Alma Pritchard, then back to Kennifer.

"You want him stopped?" he asked. And she noted that his voice was almost as gentle as a child's, cooing to a doll.

"I want you to protect yourself," Rome Kennifer said.

Davis got up from the table. He put on his hat. "I think I'll drop into town for awhile," he said.

She lowered her head over the plate, the food suddenly becoming sickening. Something had happened to her stomach. She was remembering Red Bates out in front of the Blue Bird, his impudent and expressive grin, his coolness last night.

And Rome Kennifer had just signed his death warrant.

Davis started toward the door. He was in the opening when the heavy report of the rifle came from the mesquites a hundred and fifty yards away. The water pail on its hook outside jangled sharply and then jangled again as a second 45-90 slug sent its contents spewing. Davis leaped back and slammed the door as men scrambled to their feet.

"I caught a glimpse of him ducking deeper into the brush," he said in that gentle voice. "A red head. I think yore friend Bates has come to pay us a visit."

CHAPTER XIV

THE door faced to the south—precautionary measures against the hard "northerners" which blew across the plains in wintertime—and had two windows; one for the dining room and one for the bunkroom. And now that the red-headed cow puncher out there in the brush had served warning, he seemed to settle down to methodical shooting. The big slugs drummed in through both windows at regular intervals and soon collapsed them. When the first ones started ripping through the door around the leather hinges, Alma Pritchard, sitting in a protected corner, almost smiled.

She looked at the men. They were all down back of the thick adobe walls, which no bullet could penetrate; all had rifles but dared not raise up for a shot. Kennifer's face was a dark mass of seething, impotent rage. The woman in her realized how he felt.

He had brought her out this morning, paying open court to her, letting her know his plans, his dreams, his power. He had brought her out to impress her. And right now the impressing was coming from another direction. He ducked low beneath a window and leaped across the now sagging door, coming up beside her.

"How are you?" he grunted.

"Very well, thank you. Would it be all right if I looked out a rear window?"

"I guess so. They're staggered and out of line of fire. But he might shift position. Damn his cow-punching hide—this is the last straw! Just wait until I get out of here."

"It might," she said calmly, "be a long wait. He seems to have a plentiful supply of cartridges."

That was a fact that even Kennifer couldn't deny. A final fusillade tore the upper leather hinge loose and the

door swung in half crazily, hanging at an odd angle. This apparently gave Bates a better target. After an interval, probably for reloading, things began to happen in the kitchen where a cursing cook huddled down out of sight in a corner. A 45-90 slug smacked into the stove's oven and shattered the cast iron door, sending fragments flying. More slugs drummed in. The stove pipe collapsed and soot filled the room.

"Goddammit!" yelled the cook angrily and came out with apron flying. He made a dive for the bunkroom, still cursing.

The fire suddenly ceased. For five minutes they waited. Ten. Fifteen. It grew tense in the bunkhouse. Finally a man stuck his hat on a rifle barrel and shoved it up cautiously in the opening where there now was no pane. Nothing happened. He turned to Lin Davis.

"What do you think? Reckon he's lit out?"

"Stick yore head up and find out," grunted Davis.

The puncher did so. Still nothing happened. Rome Kennifer stepped to the other window.

"Hey, Bates!" he roared. "You still out there?"

"Yes, dearie," floated from somewhere out in the mesquites. "Anything I can do for you? Bring you a dipper of water or something?"

"Where are you?"

"In my pants," came the cheerful reply.

"Dammit to hell, man, there's a woman in here!"

"Maybe she's got a sister," floated the voice from the mesquites, followed by laughter.

"She hasn't got a sister, you fool! She's—"

"Then what do you want *me* to do about it?" Red Bates shouted indignantly. "*You* brought her out!"

KENNIFER'S face turned red beneath the blue jowls, and possibly because he heard Alma Pritchard's soft, uncontrolled laughter from the corner.

"I'm sorry," she apologized. "I just can't help it. That man's as crazy as a loon, but I love his impudence. Now I know one reason why this is a great country in Texas. Men like him. Oh! Now I've put my foot in my mouth!"

"That's all right," he said gruffly. "But you got entirely the wrong impression, Alma. He's just a damn fool without any sense."

"You said at lunch that he wasn't. But never mind. And go right ahead with your work, Rome. Frankly, I'm enjoying every minute of this. I wouldn't have missed it for anything."

Kennifer put down his rifle and turned to the window again. Beneath it he motioned for the other man at the window to get ready with his rifle. "Hey, Bates!" he called again.

No answer.

"Bates! The woman in here is Alma Pritchard. You know what that means? Her father will hound you out of the country. He'll never stop until you're behind bars. Raise up and let me talk to you, you fool."

She was up at the window beside him now, her eyes scanning the thickness of the limbs and tall grass out there a hundred and fifty yards away. Presently she saw the top of a hat edge cautiously into view. She let her eyes swing to the other man at the window and cold terror of a kind she had never known suddenly gripped her. This was trickery and murder! The man had the rifle lined across the sill and was waiting, the flat hammer on the cocked weapon far back.

"Keep talkin', Rome," he called

softly. "Make him come up a little higher. I got a dead bead on him."

"Look here, Bates," Rome Kennifer obeyed, shouting loud. "Miss Pritchard is here. She's standing right beside me in the window. Raise up and take a look."

"I can see her all right. Damn but she's pretty, ain't she? Wonder what she's doing riding around the country with a yellow coyote like you. You going to marry her? Been spouting off all morning about your lands and cattle and as how her paw ought to have you for a son-in-law? How does she feel about marrying a polecat without stripes?" came jeeringly.

Kennifer's face beside the girl became a thundercloud. His teeth made a hard, grinding sound and she heard him curse savagely under his breath. That man Bates, she thought, was almost psychic. That was exactly what Kennifer had been doing all morning, impressing her, paying court, obviously preparing her for a proposal.

But the cold terror still held her and a scream fought itself down in her throat as Kennifer, realizing the hat wouldn't come up any further, nodded to the man to let drive.

The rifle crashed sharply, almost explosively in the next room. Acrid smoke rose from the black powder. The hat jogged and fell from sight—on its stick. But from a point twenty feet further away, where Bates lay in a shallow ditch, the 45-90 crashed again and the man with the rifle fell backward. He had been shot squarely through one ear by a heavy caliber bullet not intended for his ear. Red Bates wasn't as yet quite used to Ace Sampson's gun.

The man rose cursing, the ear almost gone. Blood covered his shoulder. He apparently wasn't in too much pain as yet, the shock of the slug having, for the moment, killed it. But he hopped around the room, red streaming from his cupped palm, filling the air with oaths.

Then Bates' voice called again. "Miss Pritchard! Oh, Alma!"

She stuck her head all the way out the window. "How are you cowboy?"

"Hungry. You reckon you could bring me out a cup of cawfe? Or, if Kennifer brought you out forcibly with evil intentions, I'll come in and rescue you and get the cawfe at the same time."

She didn't dare look at Kennifer. The man was ready to burst. He stood beside her, his face white with rage, his hand trembling. She had never seen such anger in any living man. She knew that the red-headed one was baiting Kennifer because of her presence and she was thoroughly enjoying the game. She fought down laughter at his rambunctiousness and answered.

"No, thank you. I'm perfectly safe here except from your shooting."

"Oh, in that case," he called, "I'll switch targets. I was getting tired shooting at the bunkhouse anyhow. If you'll go to the other window I'll show you what happens when a 45-90 slug hits a sheet iron water trough. But tell those polecats—say, how do you stand it in there in that skunk den?—tell 'em to keep out of sight or I'll bust the first head that appears."

SHE went to the other window, looking out toward the corrals. Almost at once the 45-90 broke into life again. The water trough gave off a sharp spanging sound and a stream spewed out. Four more followed. That trough would be useless for quite a long time.

"Now watch the water barrels in the wagon," he yelled gleefully, and almost immediately the five of them began to shudder under the impact of more

slugs.

Unfortunately for Kennifer, the wagon had been left in direct line with the house—and it wasn't made of adobe. The bullets from the big repeater went through both the barrels and walls and she saw long yellow holes begin to appear. One of the window panes fell in. On top of the kitchen was a long high stove pipe for good draft and Bates soon shifted his attention to it. It took two magazines of shells before the second stove pipe gave way to the big repeater.

There was not a thing that the dozen armed men in the room could do. Red Bates out there in the mesquites had the situation very much under control. Some of them gave it up and sat on the rumpled bunks, smoking and indulging in a few low curses. Kennifer began pacing the room like a caged lion, his face toward the floor. He had put down his riflle and had hands behind his back. She knew the humiliation because of her presence, the impotent, livid fires of rage that were consuming him. She could see it in every line of his face.

And she knew that back of it his fertile mind was working at top speed, planning how to overcome that humiliation and come back strong in her eyes. The woman in her realized that.

She judged him calmly, impersonally, for she was that kind of a woman. He had said it was a country for strong men only; of man against man. It was man against man now and Kennifer was on the short end. He'd have to work hard and fast to overcome what was now not in his favor. This morning while riding out she had seriously considered in her mind the possibilities of what marriage to a man like him would mean. She had never been in love. She had believed she could never fall in love with any man. She was too practical from heredity and environment.

Now she wasn't sure. She kept thinking of Red Bates, wondering if she was merely intrigued by his devil-may-care way in the face of danger, his audacity in making singlehanded war on an entire ranch, or she wondered if something deeper might be growing within her toward that man out there with a rifle.

Foolish woman, she chided herself. You're day dreaming!

It went on for another hour. By that time the game was tiring her a little. She had promised to be back by early afternoon and if she didn't return her father might be worried. Her mother, she knew, already would be having big fits. She turned to the still pacing Rome Kennifer.

"If you don't mind, Rome," she said, a bit tiredly, "I believe I'll return to town. I know it's rude of me to ride off this way but—"

"Ride off?" he almost snapped at her. "With that loco, trigger-happy cow-punching killer out there with a rifle? I wouldn't think of letting you go."

HE SAW too late that he had made a bad mistake. He saw it in the sudden lifting of her chin, the chill that began to appear in her clear eyes. "Oh, I'm sorry, Alma. I didn't mean it that way. I humbly apologize. I merely meant, my dear, that he's most likely to shoot you the minute you try to leave."

"I don't think so," she answered, and stepped to the window. "Oh, cowboy?" she called.

"Yes, *ma'm!*" came from the brush, from still a different position.

"I believe I shall return to town. I'm sure you won't mind."

"Mind?" he shouted back. "Mind

letting you out of that den of polecats? Pee-yew! I certainly hope you got plenty of perfume with you. Step right out, Alma. But I'm shooting skunks today and none of the others better not try to follow. Tell lover boy that I'm staying right here all afternoon with plenty of shells left and then tonight I'm going to stampede the herd out in the valley. So he'll get his bad, bad gun hands and come over and clean out the Circle K, will he? Come right ahead, Alma, but don't let Kennifer hide under your skirts."

She said goodbye to Kennifer and nodded to the others, then stepped carefully over the door that lay half slantwise. She went around the corner and headed for the ranch house. Her horse was not there. It had trotted away. It was down the gentle slope about four hundred yards, grazing with reins dragging. Luckily for her, her father had insisted upon all trained cow ponies for the new stable. The horse stood motionless as she caught him and swung up. She loped across the basin, crossed the dirt dam, and followed the road back to town. A mile and a half away, where the mesquites closed in, her mount suddenly threw up its head, looking off to one side; and a little gasp of surprise came from her as Red Bates rode out.

"Howdy ma'm," he grinned, in an exaggerated drawl she could have cut with a knife.

For no reason at all she burst out laughing. She rocked in the saddle until her slim body shook. "Merciful heavens!" she gasped out, getting her breath, and then went off into shrieks again.

"How's things on the Kennifer *hacienda?*" he grinned.

"Very bad at the moment, I fear. He'll have to get a new stove and several windows."

"His expenses for new glass lately," he murmured, "seem to be considerable. He's the most unlucky cuss I ever saw on lamps and bar mirrors and such."

"What are you doing here?" she demanded, sobering, the memory of Lin Davis coming back strong.

"Had to see you, ma'm. Wanted an invitation to the dance at your house warming tomorrow night."

She stared at him in disbelief. "You wouldn't dare," she breathed out.

He had edged his horse over until they sat knee to knee. She saw something devilish in his eyes. "It's kind of bad to dare me. For instance, you've got a dare in your eyes," and before she realized what was happening he had pulled her over hard and kissed her like she had never been kissed before.

"How—how dare you?" he gasped out, startled.

"There you go again," he said complainingly, and brought her back to him a second time, crushing his lips down to hers. He pushed her back into the saddle. "I've wanted to do that just out of pure cussedness right from the first," he grinned, unabashed.

"You—you—"

"Tomorrow night I reckon Rome Kennifer will have to have most of his boys present at the dance. Tonight they'll be busy watching their herds. How does it feel to be the future Mrs. Rome Kennifer?"

She whipped her horse away from him, leaving him sitting there, her fury mounting to new heights.

CHAPTER XV

BATES sat there for a few minutes, watching her disappear around a curve in the wagon road. The kissing of her had been an impulse. He knew

she was a rich man's daughter, possibly very badly spoiled, and even a trifle arrogant, should the occasion demand.

"Serves her right for running around with Kennifer," he murmured and pushed his horse into the mesquites. He rode for two miles and then pulled up abruptly as a rider swung out of the mesquites to face him, rifle across the saddle.

"Oh, hello, Pug," Bates said, reining up. "What are you doing with the blunder-bus? Hunting rabbits?"

"Looking for coyotes with Buck's binoculars," Pug said. Then his eyes glinted suspiciously. "That my shirt you're wearing?" he demanded.

"Nope," said Bates complacently. "Dog-gone it, every time you see me with any shirt you're always claiming it's yourn. Why don't you go buy an extra besides the one you've been wearing?"

"I got an extra," Pug Carson snorted. "That one you're wearin'. But them new corduroy pants in your warbag will just about fit me—"

"Hey! Now wait a minute," Red Bates protested in downright alarm. "Them pants cost me eight dollars."

"You go right ahead and keep the shirt, Reddie," soothed Pug. "I don't mind you wearin' it a-tall. Anything for a friend, says I. Share and share alike."

"But I ain't wore them pants yet! You at least ought to let me break 'em in."

Pug Carson snickered. "You won't need 'em out in the brush nights. Be a shame to ruin 'em in the mesquites. How's life on the lone prairie?"

"I'm keeping busy. How's the herd?"

"All right. We work split shifts of four men, watching from knolls. I'm over here next to Kennifer's with the binoculars. Nothing happened so far."

Red Bates grinned. "It'll probably start happening pretty soon. Maybe tonight, but I don't think so." He told Pug all that had transpired and Pug whistled. "I'm goin' on into the wagon to get a fresh horse and some chuck. I ain't such a good cook."

He left Carson to his vigil on a distant hummock and rode on, coming out into swale. He followed it to the sinks, watered the horse, and then rode over to camp. The chuckwagon was gone.

All seemed quiet. The herd was grazing, staying close to the water. In the remuda corral a dozen saddle horses dozed sleepily and switched at the flies. Buck King came loping across the flat and pulled up as Bates came out of the remuda corral with a freshly saddled mount. The foreman pulled up.

"How's things going?" Bates asked.

King swung down and walked over with him toward the circle of bed rolls. "Pretty good. No trouble so far. I didn't expect it."

"Where's Mutton Chop and the wagon?" the puncher asked, sharply.

"I sent him in town to get some grub. Shorty went along. Shorty don't pack a gun and don't drink. There shouldn't be any trouble. Leastwise I hope not. He's going up to the depot to see about the cars."

Bates shook his head dubiously. "I wouldn't want to try telling you how to run the outfit, Buck, but Mutton Chop might get into trouble. They're waiting for an opening and that might be it."

King nodded shortly. "I know it. But we're out of grub and there ain't another town within fifty miles. It was either Porterville or go hungry. I had to chance it. Where've you been?" he asked.

Bates told him in detail, and something like a grin came to King's face. It soon sobered. "Well, I dunno," he

(Continued on page 120)

The MAGNIFICENT CABALLERO

by Lester Barclay

Jerry Wade had made a choice, and now he was sorry for it—but that choice led to a very great change in his way of living!

JERRY WADE sighed, and thought: Well. You wanted it this way. Tired of the life you were leading, weren't you? Fifty a week as a clerk in the firm of Magnussen Inc., Wheat Brokers. A hall bedroom and meals at Thompsons and once a week dancing at the Aragon. Oh yes, Jerry boy, don't forget the Monday bowling at the Arena.

So you took a tip from a tout who was drunk. When he sobered enough

They rode up with wild shouts and brandishing their weapons

to realize that he had given a bum steer to a friend, he was sorry. But that bum steer was the daily double at Arlington. And it paid off to the tune of twelve hundred dollars for every two. And you played it at the track that Saturday so you got the full amount.

Twelve hundred bucks!

A very pretty girl passed along the aisle, smiled brightly into his somewhat dazed eyes and found an unoccupied seat. He was still lost in thought.

The great idea had come to him as he rode the train in from Arlington. Someone at the office had mentioned how a mutual acquaintance had taken a tour to the west, had made friends with a wealthy girl and had married her as a consequence of his trip. There had been a catch to the thing, though. It hadn't been on one of those ordinary tours where for a couple of hundred dollars one sees the west in a two-weeks rush and before one knows it, they are back in the city with a sunburn and harried recollection of monuments, cities, and bad food.

Oh no. This friend had taken the most exclusive kind of tour. It had cost him eight hundred dollars for his two weeks. So what, Jerry thought? He had married a million.

Jerry still remembered the brochure, or some of it.

"Two thousand miles of wonderful memories. See the *real* west. Spend a night in the same hotel where Wild Bill Hendricks slept. Come with us to the off-trail places, the real *west!* A luxury liner on rails, all to ourselves. Food prepared by a *chef* whose cooking is famous the world over. Companions who have been carefully selected. And of course, do not forget that our main purpose is to show you the *real west*. . . ."

"Ah. There you are, my boy," a voice said.

JERRY blinked rapidly and brought his eyes to a brighter focus on the man who had seated himself alongside. Jerry sighed once more, this time a sigh of inner desperation. It was Mister Fotheringame.

"I just looked in the club car. Didn't see you there," Fotheringame said ponderously. Everything he ever said was in ponderous tones, as though the world were hanging on to every syllable. "Glad I found you, though. Got something to tell you. That damned fool, Malton, just had a brainstorm a while back."

Wearily, Jerry asked: "And what did our little partner want now?"

Fotheringame laughed, a bellow of sound which turned the heads of every one in the car in their direction. Jerry sank lower into the seat. Fotheringame's laughter always set him on edge. It was always so damned loud, so unaffected.

"A new stunt. Jerry, boy, I like the way you call him, 'little partner.' "

"Well, isn't that what he calls us?"

"He sure does. But let me tell you the latest."

Fotheringame was always on tap with the *latest.* If it were at all possible, Jerry would have simply gotten out of the seat and made himself scarce. But it was a physical impossibility to move the other; he must have weighed in the neighborhood of three hundred pounds. So Jerry turned a bored look to the scenery flying by and listened with half an ear. The other part of him was lost in thought again. On Fotheringame and some of the others who had been so 'carefully' selected.

He remembered in vivid detail the train shed at the Union Station.

HE HAD been a little early. There was no one under the clock beside the information desk. So he had placed

his two bags alongside the wide desk and stepped to the magazine section to see what they had. A Colliers and Post had satisfied him. He hadn't been more than three minutes.

When he returned, his bags were gone.

He looked about him, his eyes wild and savage. He spotted his bags first, the girl later. She was carrying them with the greatest of difficulty. He ran forward and confronted her, his arms akimbo and every pore of his body showing the anger he felt.

"And just where do you think you're going with my bags?" he asked.

The girl looked up at him through wide, brown eyes. He was quick to note that she showed no fear, only perplexity. He was also quick to note that she was a very pretty girl, in a plain sort of way. It was exactly the way he thought. Nor did he think it odd that plainness and prettiness could run in the same groove. But she was plain only in that she didn't go to any great lengths to use make-up or wear clothes which would make her stand out. She was wearing a suit of a gray material, with a small plaid design.

"Your bags?" she asked, her voice rising slightly on a high note, yet not so loud it would attract attention. "Aren't you presuming too much?"

"I would be," he said, his anger lessening, "if those initials weren't, J. W."

Her face turned crimson when she looked down and saw them. She bit her lower lip and turned her eyes up to him imploringly.

"Oh!" she gasped. "They *are* your bags. But I. . . ."

Her mistake was shown to her at that instant. A redcap, carrying two bags came charging up.

"Wondered where you'd run off to, Miss," he said, placing the bags at her feet.

One look and Jerry saw where the mistake had been made. They were duplicates of the ones he had.

"Guess I can't blame you too much," he said. "I could have made the same mistake."

"But I should have looked," she said in apology. "J. W. doesn't stand for Mary Wallis."

"And I'm Jerry Wade," he said.

"Jerry Wade," she said musingly. "Of course I know your name. You are going on the grand tour." She laid peculiar emphasis on the words.

He could only look blank at that.

"The Malton tour," she explained. "Unless there are two Jerry Wades."

"But . . . But who are you," he asked.

"Mary Wallis. I'm the girl, but you'll discover that for yourself, who does all of Mister Malton's work, while he enjoys, if you could call it that, the spiritual benefits of being the *director* of the tour."

THE name had a meaning for him, then. All the correspondence between him and the Malton agency bore her signature. But the meaning of her words was still not clear.

She went on:

"But to get back to you, I see you didn't read your instructions too carefully. I wrote, the clock under the information desk near the passenger gates."

He remembered, then. She had, too. He looked toward where her glance was directed and saw a group of people beside one of the gates. A little man in a seersucker suit seemed to be shepherding them toward the agent who stood ready to take their tickets. Now and then he would cast a look about him which even at the distance which separated them, could be seen as one of desperation.

"I think we'd better hurry," the girl said, "before Mister Malton gets hysteria."

The redcap picked her bags up, Jerry rescued his and they trotted forward.

"Ah! *Ah!*" Malton sighed deeply in relief as they became part of the group. "I was beginning to think. . . . How silly of me, Mary. You are my right hand and my left, my staff, my rock. . . ."

"And besides," Mary put in mildly, "I have all the tickets. Just let them through," she said to the agent.

Jerry watched in amazement when in a few moments the confusion became an orderly procedure. He walked down the ramp beside her, giving her a look of wonder now and then, as if it was too much for him that such a little girl could have so much ability.

Jerry realized as soon as he had made himself comfortable in the roomette which was to be his home for the major part of the trip, that the Malton Agency spared no expense to see that their charges had the best in accommodations. There was an immense man in the room with him, a man who immediately identified himself as a Mister Fotheringame.

"H'm," Fotheringame said. "Never seen you on one of these trips before. First time out?"

"Yes," Jerry murmured the while he took his personal effects from one of the bags.

"Tenth for me," Fotheringame said. "Wouldn't miss it for the world."

Jerry threw him a puzzled glance. He could understand two times, even three, but *ten*. Nothing could be that good.

Fotheringame explained:

"I manufacture farm machinery out near Freeport. Do it fifty weeks a year. Comes this time, I give the whole plant two weeks off and I go on this tour. Love it."

"But why?"

"Mostly Malton. And since he got the Wallis girl I get an even bigger kick out of it."

There was a discreet knock at their door, interrupting the talk. Mary's voice came to them:

"The get-together in the diner, gentlemen."

"Well, let's go," Fotheringame said. "Malton will introduce you to the rest of the guests. There won't be anybody there but us and you'll get your first taste of the chef's cooking. Just a snack, of course, the real meal will come at dinner.

Jerry followed him to the diner.

IT WAS just as Fotheringame had said. The dining car held only the members of their party. Malton had a table at the far end. Mary was sitting with him. As the members walked in Mary said to each:

"There is a place card with your name at the tables. Please take your seats.

At Jerry's, there was the fat man, a very pretty girl whose name was Janice Norris and an elderly gentleman who looked like a minister, but who turned out to be a broker in stocks and bonds. Fotheringame took charge, even as they were taking their seats.

"My name is Fotheringame. This is Jerry Wade, and . . .?"

"I'm Janice Norris," the girl said.

"Brookins is mine," the elderly man replied.

"Glad to make your acquaintance," Fotheringame said. "And I think we're about set for Malton's opening address."

He was right. The seating had gone as planned and Malton arose, cleared his throat and spoke in a high-pitched voice:

"To those of my friends who have

taken this trip with me before, this will be a familiar oration. But to the rest let me just say that from this moment henceforth, we are going to be a family. And I want you to think of it as just that, a big, and happy family. No quarrels. No jealousies. No misunderstandings. Just one big, happy family.

"However, as in all families, there is a head. I am that head. Whatever problems you encounter, why just come to me with them. If anything puzzles you, let me know. There is an answer for everything. Our motto is, fun. And more fun.

"Now I won't speak of our itinerary because I think all of you read the brochure. But I will speak of this section. We are the only ones in this part of the train; we have in fact, an entire diner, club and two sleeping cars for our own personal use. It is our home, more or less, for the next two weeks. And now if you will excuse me, I must attend to the planning of the wonderful times we are going to have."

As if his words were a signal, three waiters came in bearing platters of food. Jerry noticed that Mary in her unobtrusive way was going from table to table with a message of some sort. She reached their table at last.

"The club car is ready," she said in her low, intimate voice. "I will be there until dinner to answer any questions you might like."

It seemed to Jerry that she gave him a special grin as she left their table.

"And why should we come to her with our questions?" Janice asked of no one in particular. "I think I heard Mister Malton say that was his province."

"Quite true, Miss Norris," Fotheringame said. "But if you want an answer, better see Miss Wallis."

The girl shrugged statuesque shoulders an bent her head to the food. Brookins was already chewing his with a gusto which put the rest to shame. The girl was the first to finish.

"Join me in a drink. . . Jerry," she said, pausing deliberately before using his given name. It was half-command, half-question.

He felt an odd satisfaction on hearing her call him that. He had already labeled her as, *rich, spoiled, and beautiful.* Now he realized she was on the make. Nor did he mind. It was a game he had all the intentions of playing, to the very limit of his ability.

MARY was the only one in the car. She was sitting to one side, at a small table, several lists of written notes at her elbow, and a fountain pen close to hand. She smiled brightly as they came in but only Janice noticed that the smile was brittle. Being a woman, she evaluated the smile properly and filed it away for future reference. But Mary saw only that suddenly Janice's arm had entwined itself with Jerry's.

In the next half hour, Jerry learned a great deal about Janice Norris, all of it true. And she in turn had garnered a lot of information about Jerry, very little of it true. But in the few specks of truth, were enough of something on which Jerry could build his castle. As for her, she was as he had thought, rich, spoiled and beautiful.

They were sitting at the bar, their backs to the rest of the car. When Jerry turned he saw that almost all of the party had gathered in the club car and that most of them were clustered in Mary's little corner. He could even hear her high, clear voice answering someone.

" . . . Of course, Mrs. Hobson. We make a three day tour of the pueblos. . . . No, Mister Akron, we will not see

the Penitents . . . Yes . . ."

And he noticed that she had the virtue of patience. He wondered how she did it because he was all too aware of the unreasonableness of humans. Then Janice was whispering to him again and he was back to making hey. Jerry Wade had decided that Janice Norris and he might make a go of things.

It was during the course of the next afternoon that Jerry saw many of his companions in their true light. They were passing across the face of a great farming state, the golden corn and grain stretching their swaying lengths as far as the eye could see. He and Fotheringame had walked into the club car for a drink. To Jerry's surprise, he saw that a half dozen tables had been set up at which almost the entire body was assembled at games of poker, bridge and gin rummy. Even Malton. Mary was nowhere in sight.

Fotheringame was batting a thousand, as usual, with his explanation:

"My boy," he said. "Now you have the purpose of the trip. There you see before you, the reason why only a well-to-do clientele is asked for. Gin at a dollar a point. Poker at table stakes, and bridge at ten cents a point. Only the rich can afford to lose."

"You mean," Jerry asked, "that this Malton is only a card sharp? That Mary. . . ."

"That is a nasty term, card sharp. Actually, he isn't. But he is definitely out of their class in any card game. As for Mary. . . . Well. What do you think?"

Jerry felt a flush of embarrassment sweep over his face. Anger at Fotheringame, at the way he had laid an issue squarely in his lap, made him say something he hadn't meant:

"Well, she works for him, doesn't she?"

"*For* him, not with him," Fotheringame said in a voice oddly gentle for him. "And she earns whatever he gives her. Even those who play cards sometimes want to make some of the side trips. And if they have been losing heavily, poor Mary gets it in the neck."

Jerry turned to his drink. He didn't want his companion to see the misery in his eyes.

"Now there," Fotheringame said, shaking his head toward a foursome in a corner, "is one of the wealthiest men in the west. Janice's father, Rod Norris. Bridge is his passion. Y'know, I think about the only qualification a man'd have to have as a son-in-law, would be an intimate knowledge of bridge. . . ."

"Is that why De Witt Clinton is playing as his partner?" Jerry asked.

Fotheringame grinned broadly.

"Could be. Of course he's a pretty well-to-do man in his own right, besides being a polo player with a six handicap, a par golfer and one of the best tennis players in the country."

Jerry had recognized Clinton, from the second Janice had introduced the two men, as his chief rival for her affections.

SUDDENLY Jerry felt an elbow prod him in the ribs. He had been so lost in his thoughts, reconstructing the past two days, he had completely forgotten Fotheringame's presence.

"What are you doing, boy, daydreaming?"

"Sort of," Jerry said. "Look pops. Is that all that's going to happen, card games? I came out on this trip to see the west. And not through a train window, either."

"That's what I've been telling you," Fotheringame said. "Of course if you'd been listening, you'd have learned what Malton's latest brain storm is.

"We get off the train at a little stop called Ramrod. There's going to be a bus there to take us, that is, whoever wants to make the trip, to Silver Dam. And why are we getting off at Ramrod?" He answered his own question. "Because the road from Ramrod to Silver Dam leads through country rich in bandit lore. The bus driver has the names of all the occupants of all the foot-hills we'll pass, at his finger tips. Going?"

"Know who else is going?" Jerry asked.

"Janice, of course. She told me she was getting bored. And of course Clinton, myself, and Mary."

"Uh," Jerry said. "Yeah. Might as well."

But there were more than just the five of them who got off at Ramrod. For once Fotheringame's batting average took a drop. Almost the entire group piled out at the ramshackle station, whose weather-beaten shingles peeled in the mid-day sun. A tall, lean old man in faded jeans and clean but very worn shirt came out of the station. He pulled his head to one side, let out a stream of tobacco spittle, and walked bandy-legged to meet them.

"You all waitin' for the buses?" he asked, his eyes traveling slowly from one to another.

Malton bustled to the fore.

"Yes. My name's Malton. I wired to Garney in Silver Dam and. . . ."

"I know all that," the old man said. "No need to tell me. All's I asked, was you all waitin' for the buses."

"Yes we are," Mary said slipping in between the old man and Malton.

And again, as always, Jerry was surprised at the efficient, yet seemingly unobtrusive way in which she took charge of the situation.

"Will it be here soon?" she asked.

"That's what I come to tell you," the old man said. "Garney called me 'bout an hour ago. Said to tell you folks one of the buses got engine trouble. So he's sendin' a big one . . . takes care of twenty people, near's I recollect, and a smaller one a bit later. I guess that's all. Try the other side of the depot. More shade there."

Malton's face fell at the news. But after a few moments huddle with Mary he called them to him and asked who would mind traveling in the smaller bus. Jerry volunteered instantly. And of course when he did, Janice said she too would go. Which only led to Clinton's asking not to be left out. And Fotheringame, not wanting to miss the fun, also volunteered. The party was complete when Malton suggested Mary act as director.

THE large bus arrived in an hour. The five who were waiting for the smaller one waved the rest of their party off and stood about in the shade. Fotheringame, as usual, had the floor. Jerry listened to him tell of the golden days of the west, heard him tell Clinton that the reason they were going to Silver Dam was because they were going to spend the night at the same hotel Wild Bill Hendrix had slept in. Quite suddenly, Jerry realized that Mary was missing. He looked around and spied her leaning against the side of the station. Her face was turned toward the mountains.

He strolled over and stood beside her, silently, and also looked toward the range. The air was so clear that every color, every configuration was to be seen. Cloud caps floated on and off one of the peaks.

"Pretty, isn't it?" he asked, and knew the words were inane.

"Majestic would be a better word," she said.

"So majestic, then. You know what I mean."

She turned toward him and he fell back before the blaze in her eyes.

"No. What do you mean?" she asked, and the words were sharp and clear.

He started to enlarge but stopped before a single syllable escaped him. For he realized that she wasn't speaking of the mountains, now. But he had an idea what she *was* talking about.

He fenced with her.

"I don't know why you're angry. Certainly, I haven't done anything I can think of to make you so."

"It isn't what you've *done* which makes me mad! It's what you haven't done."

This time he was puzzled.

"What's this?" he asked. "*What* haven't I done?"

"Been a man," she said.

"Say! What the devil's eating you?"

"The way you hang around that Norris woman. You may not want all the money in the world but I'd say you'd be willing to settle for the Norris fortune."

"If you were a man," he bit out, "I'd slap you silly for saying that."

"Well," she said, her voice breaking a trifle. "Isn't it the truth?"

She didn't wait for an answer. One look at his face, the color darkening, left no doubt in her mind of the rightness of her accusation. Turning swiftly, she walked around the corner to the sunny side. He started to follow and felt a tug at his sleeve.

"You should have heard Fotheringame," Janice said, her fingers tightening imperceptibly on his sleeve. "Really. The man is amazing. Knows the whole country as if he'd spent all his life here."

He didn't want to turn because he still had no control of the muscles in his jaw. They kept twitching in anger. And his face was still flushed.

She continued: "The old boy says that this part of the country has so many hotels where Hendrix slept, he can't see when the man had time to do the killings he's famous for."

THERE came the sound of approaching footsteps on the gravel walk, and with them, the sound of voices, the loudest belonging to Fotheringame.

" . . . And mind you, all this within the last thirty years. Outlawry was not stamped out until recently. Why I remember last year we were warned not to go off alone in the hills because they told us that some members of one or two of the gangs still hid out here."

Clinton's polite, "You don't say," trailed off on a note of regret when he saw the two standing together. His finely chiseled face drew itself together into lines of accent, and his firm lips became a little more thin. Yet he could not help but like Jerry. It was Janice.

He was certain that she was only playing with Jerry because she wanted to make him jealous. Well, she had succeeded. Now what was her reason for continuing her flirtation?

He knew polo ponies. He knew tennis and golf. But of women he knew little. For he never caught the malicious look in the girl's eyes when he saw her look at Mary.

For Janice had seen early that Mary had fallen in love with Jerry.

A huge crashing of metal came to them from the gravel highway. It sounded as if a truck had fallen off the trail and was crashing down the side of one of the hills. But the sound kept getting closer. And when they walked around to the sunny side of the station they saw the old man and Mary standing side by side looking toward

a bend in the road.

They saw it as it rounded the bend.

It was a truck of the vintage of twenty-five years before. Someone had placed the body of a bus on its chassis. But whoever had gone to that trouble had forgotten or had not thought of the engine under the hood. It rattled, coughed, grunted and miss-fired in startling and frightening explosive bursts. And each sounded as though it would be its last.

They watched in pop-eyed amazement as it staggered around the last bend and came to a dust-enveloping halt before them. And from behind the wheel a wizened little Mexican with a pair of grizzled handle-bar mustachios scooted out to halt in bowing jerks before them.

"Me Manuelo. Si senores y senoritas. I 'ave coom for to geeve you ride to Seelver Daam. Es a plasure."

The straw sombrero was swept from the man's head and an odor compounded of cheap hair oil and sweat was wafted to their noses.

The old man who had charge of the station stepped closer and peered keenly through faded blue eyes at the jerking little figure of the Mexican.

"Never seed you before," the old man said. "How. come Garney didn't send Juan Pablo?"

Thin, expressive and very dirty hands came up in an explosive gesture of regret.

"Senor! Juan Pablo 'ave the teeth aching. Last night he dreenk mucho tequila. Today Juan Pablo ees dronk, ees good f'r nting! Senor Garney call for me. I come, by gollies."

"You know how to handle this old wreck?" the old man asked.

"By gollies, senor! Thees is my leetle beby! Eees why I am 'ere. Nobody bot Manuelo can 'andle thees trock."

"What do you think, Miss?" the old man asked, turning to Mary.

SHE smiled thinly and turned to the Mexican and let out a stream of Spanish in his direction. Manuelo stared open-mouthed at her. But only for a second. Then he in turn spewed forth an answering stream of the same language, to which she replied in kind, after which an odd glow of pleasure lighted Manuelo's face and with many bows, all in Mary's direction he stepped backward, his sombrero gesturing for them to follow.

From the first it became evident that the truck had only one speed, high. And that the Mexican was either crazy or a wizard. He drove with one hand, manipulating the truck around the curves as though it were a sleek racing car, while with the other he gestured out the open window. He never stopped talking.

"Meester Garney, he tell me to geeve heestory of places. Thees heel we com' to. Eees was place of great fight. Many die. All weeth their boots on. Eees good, no?

"Here eees another heel. 'nother great fight. More boots. Manuelo know where all great fights tak' place. Come soon to Hangman's Canyon. Beegest fight tak' place here. Ees many die. Old Wild Beel Handreex live."

Jerry, still sulking, was paying very little attention to anyone. He watched the scenery pass. The road curved upward in a tight spiral. The engine sputtered, choked, seemed about to die by the second, yet managed to negotiate every hill. The last was the highest.

It was so high, the curve so sharp, that it took Manuelo's complete attention. He even stopped talking. At last, and just when they thought it would be impossible for them to get

there, the truck made the last few feet of the grade and stopped at the very peak of the hill.

Manuelo's sigh of relief was proof of even his doubt that the ancient truck would make it.

He stepped hard on the starter and nothing happened. Voicing a low curse he opened the cab door and stepped to the side of the cowling. His hand, outstretched to open it, never reached it. For from the two slopes to either side of the stalled truck, mounted men rode down in clouds of dust.

They surrounded the truck in an instant. And those within saw that these men were armed, mostly with pistols, a few with carbines. And saw too, that whatever their intentions, none were honest.

A short, barrel-bodied man mounted on a superb, inky-black stallion, leaped from his saddle and approached the truck. His men kept their guns pointed at those within. At sight of the two women, the stocky one threw off his sombrero in a gesture that could only be described as grandiloquent. He paid no heed to Manuelo, who was bent over the motor, staring open-mouthed at the man.

"Eef you please, ladies and gentlemans, outside."

One by one they did as he bid. And as they stood before him his men ranged themselves in a ring about the members of Maltons Tours.

"Manuelo!" the stocky one called.

Manuelo stepped forward, his brown eyes wide and frightened.

"Ees thees all?"

"Si senor Caballero. The other truck, it brak do'n. So Senor Garney ask me to peek thees people op."

A SOUR expression crossed the swarthy face of the stocky man. It was evident he had expected more.

"A fat man, a lean one, a boy and two gorls. There are batter feesh in the reever," he said in disgust.

He scratched at the mop of greasy black hair and a strong odor of garlic was wafted to them. He belched loudly, his black eyes snapping like those of a snake. "Bah! But who knows, companeros? There may be moneys here. You!" he pointed with a stubby finger to Fotheringame. "Wot you are?"

"I? Just a fat man," Fotheringame said in mild tones.

"Bot alive. Another answer like that and you weel be dad."

"I don't think so," Fotheringame said in the same mild voice. "Dead, I can bring no money. Alive . . . And I believe that's why you are here, to make money. Right?"

"The fat one talk sanse. I theenk I save heem. If for noting alse, he make me laugh. You," he pointed to Janice. "You poppa, he got money?"

"My father is Rod Norris, you greasy Mexican, and if you don't let us go my father will spend every million he has to make you pay for this indignity."

The bandit made a low bow in her direction.

"For my appearance I apoologize. And perhaps I smell bad, no? But thees words you say. They are not nice in the mouth of a beautiful woman. They are like the steenk of a skonk. I like wot you say about you poppa. He has money. Good. Now. Manuelo, listen. You go back to Silver Dam. Tell Garney, El Magnifico Caballero ees holding thees people. For the sum of one hondred thousand dollars he can have them back. You 'member?"

"Si, El Caballero," Manuelo said. "One hondred thousand dollars."

Suddenly his mouth fell open. The vastness of the sum dawned on him. And he whispered in awe, *"One hondred thousand dollars."*

El Caballero liked the way Manuelo whispered the amount.

"Sure. You theenk I cheap skater?"

"No," Mary interrupted. "But I think you're a little foolish thinking you will get that much."

"Go, Manuelo," El Caballero said. Then he turned to Mary. "Perhaps the senorita is right. Perhaps she knows thees man who is poppa. But eef he wants hees daughter. . . ."

"My father will not give you one penny," Janice spoke up. Her eyes flashed in bright blue points of anger, and her breasts heaved in spasms. She was more beautiful then than at any time Jerry had ever seen. But her anger only made El Caballero sullen.

"Enough of talk," he said suddenly. "You Jose, Juan, Jeem, an' Roberto. Geev thees your horses. And we have the spare up there in the brush. For the fat man. Vamoose Jose and breeng down the plow horse."

The men whose names he called rode up, dismounted and doubled up behind four of the others. They waited for Jose to return with the horse for Fotheringame. Then, with Jerry and the rest mounted and guarded closely, they rode up the steep side of the nearest hill.

JERRY turned in the saddle to see how the others were doing. He had been raised on a farm. Riding a horse was no new experience to him. He expected to see Clinton doing all right, and Janice. Mary, too, rode as if a saddle were nothing new to her. But it was Fotheringame who surprised him. The man was immense, as was the horse he was riding. It was the ease of his seat, the sureness with which he guided the horse, the complete control of the animal that surprised Jerry most. He didn't think it possible for so big a man to be so good a rider.

He lagged behind and one of the guards threw him a suspicious look but when he saw it was only to be near one of the girls, he continued to ride with the rest.

It was to Mary's side that Jerry rode.

"What do you think, Mary?" he asked.

"I think this El Caballero is biting off more than he can chew," she said.

"So what happens then?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. But if that society girl friend of yours doesn't learn to keep at least a civil tongue in her head, there may be unpleasant consequences."

He had to admit she was right.

They were joined by Fotheringame.

"Y'know," he said. "On first thought, I'd say this was a put-up job by Malton. A show for us. It would be just like that feather-brain to do something like that."

"And on second thought?" the girl asked.

"El Caballero is too real."

"And that's my thought, too," she said.

"Now that that's settled," Jerry said, "don't you think we ought to try to, well, escape?"

"A good idea, Jerry," Fotheringame said. "Suppose you tell us how."

"I don't know," he said. "But that doesn't mean we can't think about it."

"I have been thinking about it. From the first. And here's my conclusion. That while we are riding like this, guarded by these men, we don't stand a chance. And even if one of us does get away, the rest will suffer. What, I don't like to think about. El Caballero is an awfully mean *hombre*."

"We've got to settle somewhere, wherever his hide-out is. We certainly can't just go on riding like this all day and night. The time will come when they'll have to rest. I think that then

will be the best time for plans and action," Mary said.

"My dear," Fotheringame said. "I have always been impressed with your intelligence. Now may I say I like your kind of *guts*."

UP AHEAD, De Witt Clinton, sportsman, man-about-town, and wildly in love with the girl who was on the horse beside his, looked at his love. She was sitting on her horse like one of the Valkyrie, he thought. And suddenly the strangest desire came to him. To break through that shell of spoiled womanhood, of too much wealth and too much time to do nothing in.

"God! What a double-damned fool you are!" he said.

Her mouth popped open, exposing twin rows of perfect teeth.

"Never thinking of anyone but yourself," he continued in the same low tone, a tone of repressed bitterness. "Talking that way to this, El Caballero. Don't you ever think of what can happen because of your acts? That girl, Mary, and that nice kid, Jerry, whom you're stringing along. And that fat man, Fotheringame. Oh he may be a fool, but he is also human. Didn't you realize what might happen because of that great big mouth of yours?"

"Clint! How dare you . . . I've never been so insulted in all. . . ."

"Then it's time you were," he said in more savage tones. "You're a spoiled brat. And the first time I get a chance, I'm going to spank that fanny of yours. But hard. That is if El Caballero doesn't beat me to it."

"You—you'd dare to hit me?"

"As soon as the chance comes. And that's a promise," he said grimly.

* * *

But the man who held their destiny in his hands had more to think of than love and lovers.

El Caballero had about decided he had bit off more than he could chew. It was nice to think of, a "hondred thousand dollars." He felt with his grimy fingers of the wrinkling flesh of his throat. They hung men in this state for what he was doing. And he knew they'd make short shrift of him when they caught him. But how was he going to get out of the dilemma? Manuelo was half way to town already.

If only there was a way.

Now if this were the movies, he thought. Those keeds had the right idea. The hero was always the winner. But these tenderfeets! What could they do? Why hadn't he stuck to his business of raiding sheep for the cattle ranchers and cows for the sheepherders? No, he had to get an idea from something someone said in Silver Dam. How this little Malton man catered only to the wealthy. And what could have happened in the old days when there were real bandits.

Why, they said, those old boys would have held the whole kit and caboodle for ransom.

El Caballero kicked himself mentally. Wasn't he satisfied with the living he and his men were making? And on Saturday nights when the cattlemen were in town, didn't they treat him with respect? On Mondays the sheepmen came to town. Always the drinks and food were on them. But now! Carramba! They would hang him on the nearest tree.

If only there were a way out.

And suddenly a wide smile brightened the swarthy face. He had it! The movies. They knew how. And he knew now what to do.

IT WAS close to nightfall when at last they came to the hideout. It was a large natural cave in the side of a hill. El Caballero had chosen his hide-away

with care. From any angle except the one they came by, it was impossible to see the entrance.

One by one they dismounted. Jerry found it natural to be by the side of Mary. And Janice found Clinton's company very much to her liking. Only Fotheringame was alone. There was an odd look of intent on the fat face. More than that, there was a look of quiet determination, as if he had made his mind up to something and was going through with it.

El Caballero smothered a sigh, voiced a quick, silent prayer for the success of his maneuver and walked to the five who were standing in a tight group just before the entrance.

"Eenside, pipples," he commanded gruffly. "There ees blankets for the night. And I weel have one of my men to make sometheeng to eat. Now don't be fools, keeds, and try to escape."

Calling to one of his men, El Caballero said in a voice loud enough for the rest to hear:

"Watch them. Eef they try to escape call the boys. But do not shoot. They are worth more alive than dead."

As though their eyes were drawn to each other, Jerry and Clinton gave each other a hidden look. And both smiled. They had understood the glance. Jerry's arm tightened about the shoulders of Mary as he led her inside the dank vault of the cave. Nor did she withdraw from the embrace.

In the meantime El Caballero's men busied themselves in building a fire a short distance from the cave's entrance. Those within could hear snatches of their talk. The glow of the fire lighted the cave's interior. Jerry and Clinton searched among the blankets for some which were clean and having found several gave them to the girls. Then Clinton shook his head for Jerry to come to his side.

Janice sat beside Mary and looked deeply into the other's eyes.

"I guess being a heel is not alone a man's prerogative. And I've been one. I'm sorry. Not alone in how I've treated you and Jerry but also for the way I talked to that ugly bandit."

Mary reached over and placed her palm on the other girl's.

"And there never was anything between Jerry and me," Janice continued. "He loves you, you know that."

Mary felt a wave of heat rise to her face at the words. And Janice seeing the new-born loveliness was amazed that she ever thought Mary plain. She was beautiful!

In their corner, Jerry and Clinton conspired.

"We've got to take the chance, Clinton," Jerry said. "You heard what squat-belly said. 'No shooting.' "

"That part is all right," Clinton agreed. "But there can't be any slip-ups. The guard has to be taken care of, quickly. Remember, there are five of us, I mean three, if you can count Fotheringame. We should be enough to turn the trick. That guard doesn't look too smart to me."

"I think I can handle that," Jerry said. "I took a course in Judo a while back. It won't take me long. And it'll be silent, too. Now I'm going to lie down not far from that ugly mutt. You stay close to the girls. We'd better not say anything to the fat man. He's pretty clumsy and if he comes blundering in, he's liable to wake the whole camp. Now watch for my signal."

Clinton shook his head in understanding and moved to the girls' side. Jerry saw him whisper their plan to them and he smiled to himself. It shouldn't be too hard. As the Judo instructor had said, "It's a matter of balance. Get the other guy off it and

you can handle the biggest jerk like a baby."

BUT they hadn't counted on one thing. They were exhausted. And so one by one they fell asleep, although not for long. Jerry was the first to wake. He woke with a start and looked around. Janice lay snuggled close in Clinton's arms. Mary was curled up like a little kitten. Fotheringame . . . Fotheringame was gone, Jerry realized with a start. Quickly he moved to Clinton's side and after placing the palm of his hand across the other's mouth, shook him. He came awake instantly, and Jerry whispered the news of Fotheringame's disappearance into the other's ear. Although he whispered, the sound woke the girls.

"Can you imagine," Jerry said, "after all his talk about not trying anything because it would endanger the rest, *he* takes a powder. A fine pal our fat friend turned out to be."

"Maybe you're judging him a little harshly?" Mary said.

"Not him! He's interested only in his own skin."

"Well," Clinton said. "No use worrying about him. I see our boy is drowsing there. Think we ought to go to work?"

"Yeah. But let me get to him first. If I need help don't wait for me to ask. Pile in."

Jerry moved forward on stealthy feet. He could see the shapes of men lying about the fire, which was down to dying embers. Slowly, Jerry moved along the near wall of the cave. The sentry, his head pillowed on his arms, seemed sound asleep. Foot by foot Jerry crept closer until only a few feet separated him from the sleeping man. Then he went to a crouch and leaped forward, his arms outstretched in a dive. He might have succeeded in gaining the other's side without waking him, if he hadn't slipped on a pebble as he left his feet. And instead of landing on the other, he fell flat on his belly beside the guard. The guard woke instantly.

And Jerry's wind was knocked out by his belly-flop.

In a second the guard was erect, but before he could do more than stare stupidly at Jerry, lying almost at his feet, Clinton came charging up. The guard forgot all else in the excitement and tugged his pistol free from the holster. One look at the savage face of the man coming made the guard think of his life. Clinton was out for blood.

Before the guard could level the pistol, Clinton was on him, one hand pawing wildly for the gun, the other reaching for the hairy throat. The guard acted instinctively and kicked at Clinton, the booted foot catching the other on the shinbone. A howl of pain was forced from Clinton's lips.

And the girls went into action then. The sight of their protectors, one in a heap on the ground, the other dancing on one leg, gave them a courage neither knew she possessed. Shrieking imprecations at the tops of their lungs they leaped as one for the frightened guard. He could only throw up his hands in helpless defense before they hit him simultaneously.

While Mary pulled his hair out by the handful, Janice raked him with her nails. And all the time they shrieked as if the devil were after them.

In an instant the whole camp was awake.

MEN scrambled erect and came charging forward. And from the shadows beyond the dying fire two figures turned toward the inferno of sound. One of them whispered a hasty

something to the other and set off to where the horses had been tethered. The other, El Caballero, came running to where a group of milling men tried to tear the girls from the guard.

They succeeded in freeing the frightened man just as their chief came up.

"Wot is going on here?" El Caballero snarled.

"They—he tried to kill our men," the girls yelled into his face.

El Caballero looked to where Jerry and Clinton stood. They bowed their heads in shame as he said:

"Men, you call these! They are bebies! Latting their women fight their battles. They could not carry water for my horses, these men of yours."

"Now you look here!" Mary shrilled, starting for El Caballero, and Janice was right behind her. "You can't talk that way about the man I love!"

They would have attacked him if Jerry and Clinton hadn't leaped forward to grab them.

"Oh. Go bok to sleep," El Caballero grunted sourly. He turned to find the guard beside him. The moonlight showed the man's face covered with streaks of raw flesh where Janice's finger nails had raked the skin. And one side of his scalp showed bald from Mary's clutching fingers.

"As for you, you eedeeot," El Caballero shouted, kicking the guard heavily in the seat of the pants, "from now on I hire you out to seet weeth babees when the mama goes to a movie. Get out from my eyes, eedeeot!"

But I am the bigger fool, El Caballero thought, as he trudged back with the rest of his men. I should have known better than to put him on guard. Now I have only one hope.

It never occurred to him that the easiest way to get rid of his unwelcome guests was to simply put them on the horses, point out the road to Silver Dam and send them on their way. He had a strange perverted pride, a pride which had no meaning, for the misery it was causing him. But that pride would not let him free them. They had to be rescued!

EL CABALLERO was the first awake the next morning. He awakened the rest, one by one. And to each, he whispered the same thing:

"Ees goin' to be beeg excitement soon. Ees going to be a man coming who weel shoot his guns like devil. Bot not at us! So I don' want anyone shooting at heem. When those boys and gorls run from cave mek like for to fight. Only eef I see one man fight like real, I make heem to forget hees father."

It was no idle threat. He could just about do that very thing.

El Caballero spread them about. Not a sound came from the cave. He looked toward the yawning cavity and smiled grimly. In a few minutes there would be enough excitement for all. He looked to the ridge down which they had come. It was over this ridge that the man he expected, would come. And as if the thought had brought him, a gigantic figure on an immense horse appeared, framed against the sky.

He was cloaked from head to foot, and a mask hung from the wide-brimmed black hat which covered his head. He sat his horse for a few seconds, surveying the land below, then setting his heels to the animal, the horseman came charging full speed down on the camp below. El Caballero could see the gleaming muzzle of a .45 which swung from his hand. A smile played about the bandit's mouth as he took a last look around to see if his men were as he wanted them to be.

And the strange masked figure was

almost in their midst.

A wild cowboy yell screeched from the lips of the strange horseman, and the gun swung upward to spew lead at the sky in a roar of sudden sound. El Caballero took a last look to the cave, saw the two men and women emerge and turned his attention to the oncoming horseman.

Now his men were answering the shots. The hammer sounds of their pistols and the sharper sounds of their carbines filled the air with leaden messengers of death.

To the four who watched from the mouth of the cave it was the most wonderful thing in the world that in all the hail of lead coming toward him, the mysterious horseman escaped. It was Mary who recognized him. And with her startled cry of, "Wild Bill Hendrix," there came a half dozen echoes.

Straight for the four at the cave the horseman charged. His path led between the dozen men of the bandit chief. It was a miracle that in all the wild shooting, no one was hurt.

Leaping from his horse, he whirled and sent two more shots at the hiding bandits. Then before the startled watchers, El Caballero rose and shouted for his men to escape.

IT SHOULD have ended there. But Jerry, his blood boiling from the fiasco of the night before leaped forward to intercept El Caballero. Clinton hesitated only a fraction of a second and followed the other. No one heard the grunt of disgust from the masked stranger as he ran in the other's wake.

Jerry reached the fleeing man in twenty yards. A wild leap and they tumbled to the ground. Two of El Caballero's men, seeing their chief's predicament leaped to his rescue. And Clinton added his weight to the pile. But the biggest factor was the masked stranger.

It was impossible to tell on whose side he was. For with one hand he dealt a blow to Jerry and with the other struck El Caballero. And when Clinton came into his range, he sent him to the ground with a back-handed slap, while at the same time he almost stunned one of the bandit's men with a punch to the ribs. How it was that Jerry and Clinton found themselves on the ground they didn't know. But when they picked themselves up, it was to see El Caballero and the others scooting for the place where they had tethered their horses.

Slowly they turned to the huge masked figure.

"You can take off the fancy togs, Wild Bill Hendrix," Jerry said. "That big, fat belly of yours gives you away."

Almost regretfully, Fotheringame threw aside the cloak, the mask and the sombrero. There was a broad, childish grin on his thick cupid's-bow mouth as he faced them.

"Okay, fat man. Spill it," Jerry said.

"Oh, it's really quite simple. Wild Bill Hendrix is a legendary figure in these parts. And it so happens that he looked a great deal like me. What's more, he's supposed to be alive. So I thought if I could get a horse and, er . . ." he floundered suddenly.

"Go on," both Jerry and Clinton commanded.

It was Mary who came to his rescue.

"What's the difference? He saved us, and that's all that matters, doesn't it?"

* * *

Late that afternoon when they had arrived safely in Silver Dam, it was odd but El Caballero had neglected to take their horses, Malton took the whole party to the only hotel in town.

"This," he said in his piping voice, "is the very hotel where Wild Bill Hen-

drix slept. What is more, I was talking to a man I know here. And he tells me that Hendrix has been seen around these parts. There's supposed to be a bandit around a man they call, El Caballero. . . ."

Mary had suddenly detached herself from Jerry's arms and had whispered something in Malton's ear. He turned a startled look to her, cleared his throat, and said:

"I have just heard from my assistant that El Caballero has departed from these parts. So perhaps we will not see Wild Bill in action."

* * *

The night was bright with moonlight and Jerry, his arm around Mary's waist, strolled the main street.

"And to think if it hadn't been for a pair of initials I might never have met you."

"Yes. But it took a man who called himself The Magnificent Caballero to show you where your interests lay," she reminded him.

"Y'know what I think," he said after a few minutes' thought. "I think the whole thing was a put-up job."

"Darling," she said. "After all, the customers expect an awful lot for eight hundred dollars."

"If it were eight million," he said, "you'd be cheap."

CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

★ By JAMES A. HINES ★

1. What person is said to have been the mildest and most gentle bandit that ever held up a stage?
2. What does the term "straight bucking" mean?
3. When was Henry Plummer, gambler and master organizer of frontier crime, hanged?
4. Who was William Antrim?
5. What is a "reata"?
6. What outlaw bandit was frequently termed the "Robin Hood of Eldorado"?
7. What bandit is known as the king of "musical comedy outlaws"?
8. What is the term "peeler" applied to?
9. Who were the "Terrible Harpes"?
10. What bandit was known as the "Romeo of Oklahoma outlaws"?
11. Who were "Cattle Annie," and "Little Breeches"?
12. What is a hackamore?
13. What is a hot roll?
14. For the lack of a horse, as the old saying goes, what person lost out in the Dalton gang's last gun battle, but saved his own life?
15. What is the difference between a pinto and a paint horse?
16. What does the term "savvy" mean?
17. What person's death marked the end to an era of Oklahoma outlawry?
18. What are "tailings"?
19. When was William Frederick Cody, noted Scout and Indian-fighter, born?
20. Who was the first person to construct telegraph wires across the Great Plains?

(Answers on page 106)

★ READ THEM ALL! ★

"Mammoth"

WESTERN — DETECTIVE — ADVENTURE — MYSTERY

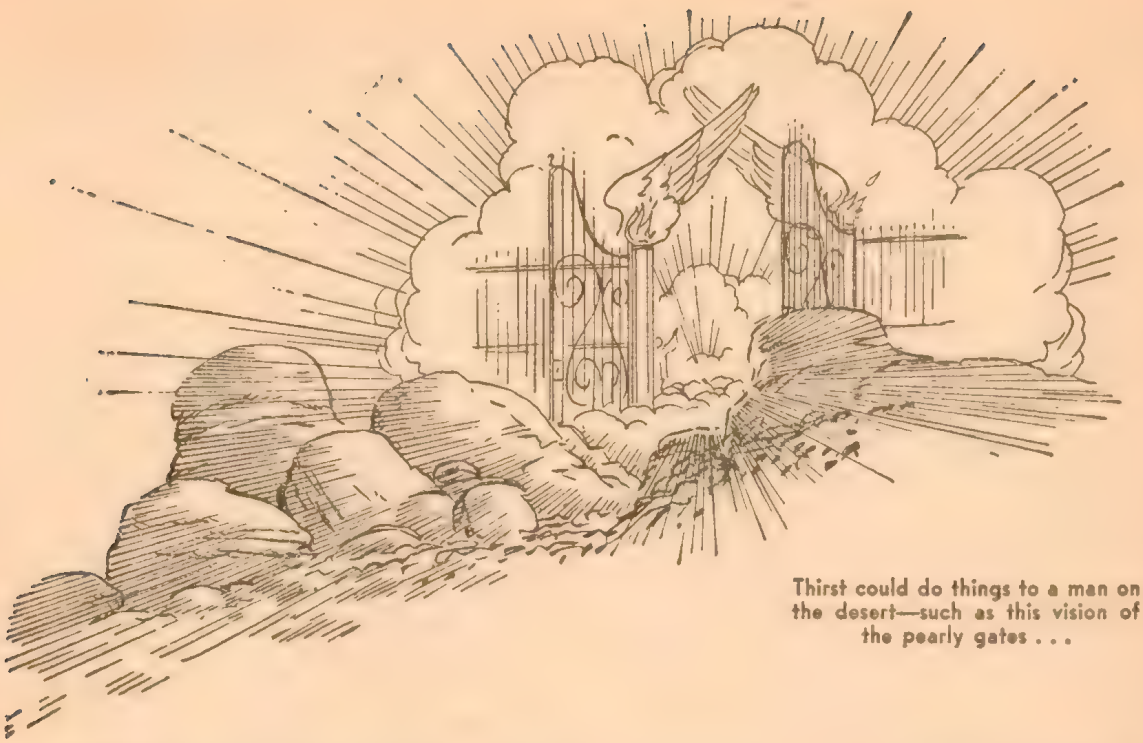
ZIFF-DAVIS MAGAZINES ARE TOPS

A MILLION READERS MONTHLY SAY SO

JOE SMITH MAKES A STRIKE

by Earl Jackson

Joe didn't believe he was slated for Heaven, but so long as he was there, he decided to prospect a bit!



Thirst could do things to a man on the desert—such as this vision of the pearly gates . . .

THE July sun beat pitilessly down on a gray desolation of craggy malapai hills, studded at infrequent intervals with tufts of dried bunch grass and stunted cholla and prickly pear. Heat waves shimmered and danced above the parched and dusty earth, giving in the distance the tantalizing illusion of silvery water. A turkey vulture widened his soaring orbit to bring more clearly into his vision the place, far below in the arroyo bottom, where the water hole had been. Two dots were visible down there, and one was prone.

Joe Smith had been prospecting a long time. Too long, he thought grimly, to let himself get caught with a dry canteen in the foothills of the Purgatory Range. But then, there always had to be a first. And this was the first time, in a score of crossings over these mountains, that he had failed to find water here.

His gnarled fingers relaxed their grip on the miner's pick, where he lay on his belly at the edge of the hole he had dug in the gravel. The bottom of the hole was as dry as the top. Joe was very, very thirsty, and weak. He rolled on his side and stared through red-rimmed eyes at his patient, long-eared companion. As his swollen tongue attempted to cooperate with parched and bleeding lips to speak, he heard his voice come out in a gutteral croak.

"Cleopatra, this is the first mistake I ever made. But there's lots of water over there. You go roll in it." His arm raised, pointing toward the shimmering parody of water in the mirage. The donkey raised her ears and looked the way he pointed. But neither she nor Joe could see beyond the illusory lake to the thunderheads which were barely peeping over the skyline of the Purgatory Range. Suddenly the man's arm dropped, and his head sagged forward to the ground as he mumbled "I'll get there after a while, but I'm a leetle tired. . . ."

THE next thing Joe knew it seemed that he was walking briskly up a

rocky trail, with Cleopatra plodding behind, toward two enormous gates, which were of the most beautiful pearly color, and towered so high their tops were lost in the sky. Near the entrance was a little building of white marble with a rose tile roof. The open front contained a broad desk top with a register book in it. Joe stopped at the booth to ask where he could get a drink of water.

To his surprise a little old man wearing a white night shirt, a green eyeshade, and a halo rose from a chair to greet him.

"Why, certainly you can have a drink. Just step around the corner of the building." Joe did as he was bid, and a moment later Cleopatra joined him, for here was a bubbling fountain of the most beautiful sparkling water he had ever seen. After they had drunk until it was impossible to take more, Joe stepped back to the front of the booth.

"Sure much obliged to you for the drink, stranger," he said. "You don't happen to know if them gates will open, do you? Me and Cleopatra would kind of like to go through."

The little man beamed, and his halo wavered up and down above his ears as he spoke. "Why, of course it opens, sir. Will you please sign the register here, first, and give me your social security number and your latest address?"

Joe scratched his head, while his eyes clung with fascination to that halo. "Gosh, mister, I never had no account number. And my latest address—well, I reckon that would be Desperation Wash, in the Purgatory Mountains, Arizona. Is that enough?"

The little man smiled engagingly and said "In that case, perhaps you will show me your birth certificate. It's just to identify you."

Joe thought this over a moment. "I never had no birth certificate. The folks figgered anything that cost as much as I did when I was hatched must be sure enough real, without no papers to prove it. They had to hire a man to cut the wood for a month after I showed up, so ma could get rested up."

"In that case," replied his questioner, "just show me your driver's license. That should fix it up."

Joe thought again. "Do you work for the govamint?" he demanded, suspiciously. "Nobody else would make me prove I am here, when I can see with my own two eyes that I am standing right smack dab on my own two feet in front of you."

The man spread his hands. "It's just a routine thing, sir. We must keep our records straight."

" 'Cause if you do," continued Joe. "They's no need for lookin' me up in no records. I've done paid my income tax. And I ain't got no driver's license. I never had one. The only thing I've ever drove is a burro, and I never had to have no license for that."

"Please don't be annoyed," was the reply. "No offense was intended. I'm sure your own recognizance should be sufficient. If you'll just sign the register I'll check with Headquarters right now."

JOE took the pencil, and while he laboriously scrawled his name the little man busied himself with the telephone. After a minute he turned and said "It is a little irregular, sir, but the boss said to send you on in when you're ready. Here is your pass." He handed Joe a card.

"Who do I say sent me?"

"Oh, just say it was Gary, the gateman. And can't I take care of your long-eared friend while you are at the office?"

"Well, now, I don't mind if you do, Gary, for a bit." Joe was mollified now.

"Don't pull on her lead rope, though. Just push her the way you don't want her to go, and she'll foller you."

He turned to look for Cleopatra, and chuckled. "Reckon she has done took care of herself, while we was a talkin'." They found the donkey belly-deep in a clover patch near the fountain.

Joe headed toward the pearly gates, which slid noiselessly open as he approached them. He stopped in the middle, trying to puzzle out how they were operated, but was quickly distracted by the vista ahead.

Before him stretched a marble walk, bordered with banks of flowers of every color of the rainbow. Trees, burdened with luscious fruit and singing birds, formed a double column to either side of the borders. Beyond the cool shadows peeped bits of green lawns and bubbling fountains. Straight ahead he followed the walk between massive columns toward a door of crystalline amber colored glass. At this, Joe shook his head and grunted disparagingly.

"Nobody but the govamint would have all this money to throw away." He grumbled. "It's purty, all right, but took a mint of taxpayers' money to build all them gardens and things."

He climbed a set of steps decorated in spiralling bands of rainbow hues, walked through a gigantic arch, and confronted a huge revolving door, above which hung a sign which stated, in glowing letters:

THIS IS HEAVEN

Main Offices of Saint Peter and the Heavenly Host. Open daily from 8:00 to 5:00. Evening hours by appointment.

Joe clucked approvingly. "Hain't down to a five day week yet, anyhow."

On either side of the door, sitting on flat rose-colored cushions were two men of about middle age, clad in what appeared to be long white night shirts and white beards, each idly twanging the strings of a harp. Above each was a silvery halo, and behind trailed snowy white wings. One of the men was smoking a large cigar, the other took his hands from the strings occasionally to lift a tall and sparkling glass to his lips. Both looked supremely happy. As Joe hesitated, they waved him onward with a friendly nod.

Joe dubiously entered the revolving door, which propelled him into a foyer done in chromium and gold. Across the floor he saw a girl receptionist behind a desk and typewriter. The girl rose and beamed graciously at him, and Joe caught his breath. She also had a halo and silvery wings, but her night gown was draped in a manner calculated to show Nature's loving craftsmanship. It looked as though it was woven of spun glass, for as she moved every shimmering curve reflected a whole galaxy of light waves.

"You are Mr. Smith, aren't you?" she said. "Won't you follow me? Saint Peter is expecting you."

JOE figured he would follow her anywhere if she asked him to. A moment later he stood in an office the size of an auditorium, before a huge desk. He heard the liquid burble of the receptionist's voice, and then it was drowned out by the booming bass of Saint Peter's.

"Sit down, Joe Smith. And welcome to Heaven!"

Joe slid into a seat which felt like a cushion of air, and gazed in fascination into the piercing eyes of the Big Fisherman. Saint Peter had a kindly face and a truly stupendous beard, and was munching on a kippered herring as Joe first saw him. He pushed a tray of the fish across the desk toward the prospector with a gesture which said "Help yourself," while he contemplated Joe

for a moment.

"By your record you are due some day to be one of our happy throng. Through some slight error in our bookkeeping department we had been unaware that you were to arrive quite so soon, but be assured that you are welcome. I want you to know that you belong here, just as much as any one of us, and that eternal happiness is yours for the asking. You should feel free to ask any of our assistants for help at any time, and I also am always at your service. I am tied so much to the office lately, with the extra rush of business—it's the effect of the war, you know—that I can't get around as much as I would like to. But one of the boys will always be near, and with all these new-fangled gadgets he can get in touch with me in no time."

Saint Peter stood up, and immediately a rosy cherub flitted in to hover at the prospector's shoulder. Joe grasped the out-stretched hand of the apostle, and was amazed at the feeling of strength and vitality which surged through him. The cherub nudged his ear and whispered "Come with me, please sir."

Joe Smith next found himself at another desk off the main office, where he surrendered his pass to an interviewer. She was a motherly old lady angel, and looked at him part of the time through her bifocals and part of the time over their rims, while she asked a host of questions. Joe had a vehement dislike for red tape, but he was so humbled after his meeting with Saint Peter that he answered as rapidly and as well as he could, while a typist neatly clattered off the answers onto a set of file cards. The questions asked were a great deal like those of a ration board inquisition he had once been through when seeking extra ration points for canned goods.

Joe was next ushered from the offices into an enormous rose and gold bathroom, where he was turned over to a broad and coal black negro mammy, whose shining black face beamed with happiness as she greeted him.

"Praise de lawd and pass de ammunition," she chortled gleefully. "Mister Smith, is I glad to see you all in heah! Fo' de las' week it seems I has done nothin' but purify brand spankin' clean ladies and gents, an' bless me if'n it didn't seem like a waste of time to scrub dere hides. But you has a hide as I can see fum heah has a lot of dat good honest terra firma on it. Hurry off wif yo' clothes, suh, so's I kin git to wo'k!"

TO SAY that this embarrassed Joe would be putting it very lightly. He had never undressed in front of a woman in his life. But this matronly darky was not to be put off, being very polite but very insistent, and giving the impression of samsonian strength. Soon Joe ended up as naked as the day he was born, and was almost as helpless as putty in her hands. She scrubbed and scrubbed his seamed and leathery epidermis until he was sure it was ready to come off, and when he was all bathed and dried she sprinkled him with perfume, over his sputtered protests, and dusted him with a powder puff as large as a wash pan. Then she stood off and surveyed her work proudly.

"Mister Smith, ef'n you ain't de cleanest prospector evah I laid eyes on, den I miss my guess. You is now clean enough to enter Heaven, and dat is sure."

Next, Joe was ushered in his birthday suit down a long hall into the ward room. Here a mousy little clerk with pince-nez glasses and fluttery wings looked at him critically, then turned to his laden shelves. He handed out one of the white robes, which Joe gratefully

squirmed into, a pair of silvery strap sandals, a tiny white cloud the size of a sofa pillow, and a large harp. Joe set this clumsy object disdainfully on the floor, and next received a memorandum pad with attached pencil. The pad was labelled "Wish Book."

The clerk explained the items in a dull monotone. "This robe and sandals you are supposed to wear, until you are assigned to your section. After that, wear what you want. After a while, if you are good enough, you will sprout wings. But you don't want the things—they are mostly just a nuisance, always getting in the way, and you can't sleep on your back in them. You will spend a lot of time at first sitting on this cloud and just floating around, playing the harp. Playing it will come natural, but after a while you will get tired of doing that, for all the tunes will sound the same. Then you will probably do like most of the others, and come back and check in the harp and the cloud with me.

"This pad you are supposed to use when you want to make a wish. Ordinarily any reasonable wish is granted, but please be moderate about your wishes for a while." He pointed an admonitory finger at Joe, as though anticipating some unreasonable desires. "There's been a war on, you know, and we have had to tighten our belts a bit. There's plenty of nectar and ambrosia, and all of that staple stuff, but try to go easy on wishing for bacon and butter and sugar and other scarcities for a while."

Joe gaped in astonishment "You don't mean there's been a war here in Heaven!"

"Oh, Heavens no! But with the silly mortals spending all their time and money killing each other off, it worked a hardship on everybody. We were rationed on many things up here too, and are still short on some items.

"Now, be sure to remember this. When you write a wish on this pad, be sure to use the carbon sheets, and make an original and six copies. There used to be only one copy required, but two efficiency experts got in here somehow a while back, and now require the extra five. The original, as it says here, goes to Saint Peter's office. One goes to the general accounting office, one to the office of the Chief Bookkeeper, one to the Supervisor for your section, one to the checking station at the gate, one to the laundry, and one to this office."

JOE'S head was in a whirl. "And they call this Heaven," he moaned, clapping his hands to his forehead. "It's just the same old govamint, full of bureaucrats and red tape. Do I *have* to wish for somethin'?"

"No, you don't have to. But if you don't you won't be assigned to your section. However, you can wish for a secretary to fill out the forms for you."

"And this here silly harp," Joe complained. "I just ain't much of a musician. Can't I just turn this in for a mouth organ? I used to play one of them when I was a young 'un."

The clerk obligingly exchanged the harp for the tiny instrument, and suddenly an afterthought hit him.

"Heavens! I almost forgot to give you a halo." He hurriedly reached into an enormous closet, and pulled out a half dozen halos of different sizes. The first one he tried fell over Joe's shoulders. The second one sailed off free to the ceiling. Several other sizes were tried, and not one stayed where it was supposed to be.

"That is strange," the clerk muttered to himself, in some annoyance. "They aren't supposed to do that. I must write a memo to the main office about

this. There's a mistake somewhere. You simply must have a halo." He frowned in perplexity, absently scratching in his left wing feathers, near the shoulder.

"Lice?" Joe asked, sympathetically.

"No!" was the indignant response. "Just thinking."

They finally compromised with a halo which fitted loosely around Joe's neck. He thought this one more comfortable than the rest, as in this position it reminded him a little of a bandanna handkerchief.

At last the little clerk, perspiring freely over his halo troubles, showed Joe the wardroom door he was supposed to go through, and then agitatedly followed him to point out a tall lanky angel with a pained expression on his face.

"My name is Pete, and I'm to be your guide until you find your section," said he. "Are you ready to start?"

Joe suddenly thought of Cleopatra, and said he was ready to go as soon as he knew everything would be all right with her.

"Don't worry about your donkey," Pete assured him. "It will be well taken care of at the gate until you get located, and will then be brought to you."

Joe accompanied his guide out into the street, and there emulated him by seating himself on his tiny cloud. Then, without his doing anything more about it, he was floated through the air by this marvelous vehicle, just behind and slightly to the side of Pete, and a few feet above the ground.

By now Joe's usual taciturnity was broken by buzzing curiosity. "Pete, I thought everyone in Heaven was s'posed to be happy. You don't look thataway. Have you got a bellyache?"

Pete made a wry face. "It's a funny thing. Before I came to Heaven I was a government auditor. I disliked working in red ink so intensely that I suffered from chronic dyspepsia. After reaching Heaven I decided I didn't want dyspepsia any more, and for a long time I did without it. I finally found that with nothing to complain about I was getting dissatisfied. So now I have brought back a part of the old dyspepsia, and am now as happy as anybody up here."

Joe couldn't understand such foolishness, so he dropped the subject, and fastened his gaze on the bewilderingly beautiful panorama of gilded palaces and gardens which flitted past under their gaze. After a while he asked "Are them streets really covered with gold?"

"They are to anyone who wants them to be gold."

"Would it be all right if I was to stake out a claim along some gutter, where it wouldn't be in the way of all them fancy chariots?" he asked. "About a block long would be enough."

Pete laughed. "If that were to start, there'd soon be a prospector in every gutter."

WATCHING carefully to see that they avoided the traffic of numberless other soaring angels, they flitted over beautiful homes and business buildings, while Pete explained what each district was for.

"That beautiful fishing village we just passed, with all the docks on the lake side, is where most of the fisherfolk decided they wanted to live. After a while they became discontented, and for the longest time nobody guessed why. Finally someone wished for the smell of dead fish, and now everybody in the village is blissfully happy. This next place, the noisy bedlam centered in that market spot, is the ghetto. That section also contains more banks and

loan offices than any other portion of Heaven. Those glittering palaces on the hills, each with its swimming pool and its harem, belong to many of the retired business men. The sultans don't want them—they evidently saw too much of that sort of thing on earth. That strange looking skyscraper is a set of 365 apartments, each tenanted by a glamorous girl, and all the property of an ex-advertising executive.

"Most people try several sorts of life before they finally settle down. Then many decide to take up the kind of existence they led on earth, much glorified usually, and minus the tooth aches, high blood pressure, and the worries over income tax. I know one executive who keeps a large staff of auditors busy all the time working up his income tax returns. Then every year on March 15 he gleefully tears up the returns, scattering them all over his section of Heaven."

Joe had been thoughtfully digesting all of this. "One thing don't seem right," he said in perplexity. "I thought only good folks got to Heaven. Then how did that feller with the 365 girl friends get up here?"

Pete waved a deprecatory hand. "Oh, that is easy to explain. The fellow wasn't really that kind of person on earth at all. The life he led there was perfectly proper. It was simply that deep down inside him he wanted to be a great lover. So here he gets his wish. Of course it's all illusion, my friend, all illusion."

"What's that?" Joe wanted to know.

"Oh, an illusion is where you get what you want without hurting somebody else."

Joe decided confidentially to himself that Pete was a little touched in the head, but he didn't say so. He glanced with interest at a new scene below them. A huge industrial plant sprawled octopus-like over a lake side district, and crowding the walks around its main buildings was a horde of people, many carrying banners and making a great deal of noise. Here and there could be seen a man orating at the top of his lungs from a soap box, to a group of avid listeners.

"Strikers, picketing a steel plant," explained Pete. "To every one of them, this is Heaven. Saint Peter is highly pleased with the economy of this type of wish gratification. For the labor and cost involved in one huge set like this he has made over 3,000 new angels happy."

"What about the fellers that run the steel plant?" Joe wanted to know. "Are they happy, too?"

"In this case, yes. Otherwise the real industrialists would have to be elsewhere, and their presence here would be illusory. But in this case the steel plant operators believe the strikers to be jobbers and wholesalers clamoring at their gates for more high priced goods than the plant is able to supply, and they are planning on expansion to take care of a rising market."

JOE'S head whirled with new forms of logic totally incomprehensible to him, as he followed Pete away from the steel plant. They soared over a set of jagged hills, composed mostly of rich metamorphic rocks, in which glistened all the colors that ever filled a prospector's dream. As an old placer miner, he saw some mighty inviting looking gravels in the arroyo bottoms, but he also saw that every last one of them already had some other prospector at work. Most of them were set up with the usual type of camp, but some had decided to try some new ideas with the Heaven-brought opportunity. Joe was especially impressed with one camp that he saw. Here was the typical bearded

old prospector, but he was seated comfortably in a chromium trimmed barber chair, with a large beach parasol spreading overhead, hiding the upper part of his face from view. On a side table with a bottle of beer and a can opener. In the man's hands were an opened can of pork and beans, and a silver spoon. A few feet to one side were the prospector's two burros, browsing in a patch of lush grass. In the bottom of the gravelly arroyo, operating one of the primitive dry rocker type cradles by hand, toiled a paunchy capitalist, attired in silk hat, cutaway coat, and spats. Sweat dripped down the man's unhappy face, and he paused for breath. From under the parasol came the harsh order "Get a move on there. Whaddya think this is, a rest cure?"

Joe said, "Hey, Pete, let's go down a minute. I think I know the voice of that old badger."

They lowered their clouds and drifted to the ground in front of the parasol. Joe sprang from his seat with his hands outstretched. "Hardrock Milligan, you old scalawag! Am I glad to see you!"

A gleam of recognition came over Hardrock's eyes as he grinned and wrung Joe's hand with a grip of iron. "I thought you'd be a' comin' up here one of these days, Joe. Allus told you them Purgatory Mountains 'd get you."

"This here's Pete, my guide," said Joe. Hardrock said "Howdy," and proceded to show them over his claim. Then in his tent he exhibited a tin basin filled with gold nuggets, ranging from the size of buck shot to that of a little finger nail. He beamed proudly as Joe admired the specimens. "I got a real good claim here. Figured I'd work out this sand pocket, and then see if I couldn't trace it to the mother lode. My man ain't too good a worker, but he'll do in a pinch."

Joe said "I remember you always did say the trouble with the country was the ding blasted capitalists, and you swore some day that you'd get even with 'em. But tell me something. This is s'posed to be Heaven. Do you think that feller in the silk hat is enjoyin' hisself?"

"I don't know whether he is enjoyin' himself," replied Hardrock, "But I sure as hell am. Ain't had so much fun in a month of Sundays."

"I kin easy see it's Heaven for you, but ain't it Hell for him?"

"Here is the way that works," Pete said. "For Hardrock this is Heaven. He is getting what he wants. The capitalist gentleman is obviously unhappy, on the face of things. But if that capitalist is actually in Heaven too, he doesn't know, in his own particular little part of Heaven, that he is doing this menial job of labor. He is probably rolling in luxury in a silver palace with handmaidens and golden whiskey decanters in all directions. This is simply his alter ego working for Hardrock. For all we know, Hardrock's alter ego, without Hardrock knowing anything about it, may be sweating out the days digging sewers for the capitalist. You might say that other ego is the sinful part of Hardrock, not bad enough to have kept him out of Heaven, but bad enough to have to atone by working out other folks' dreams. Do you get the idea?"

NEITHER of the old prospectors got very much, but they weren't wasting time worrying about it. They talked a mile a minute, for over an hour, and finally Joe got to worrying about the fact that he hadn't as yet staked out a claim anywhere. Hardrock clapped him on the back and said "Joe, there's plenty of room here in my stake. I'll

be glad to go halves with you, if you want to split my job of loafin' with me fifty-fifty. I'll also. . . ."

Pete interrupted with a sad voice. "Gentlemen, I do hate to have to say this, but really it will not be possible for Hardrock to share this claim with you now, Joe. You see, Heaven is crowded right now. With the war barely over, we have been getting calls for more accommodations in some districts than we have room for. I have just noticed, much to my sorrow, that the prospector section of Heaven is temporarily filled up to its quota limit. You see, we've had a building boom on since the war started, putting new hills and valleys and gravelly bottoms in to make room for the newcomers, but some of the materials needed are short right now. Until we get a release on some of these items, construction of new territory is temporarily at a standstill. Saint Peter has made one inflexible rule, and that is that we must not have over-crowding. Otherwise, he feels we might in the end defeat our main purpose of making everybody happy."

"Gosh, does that mean that I got to wait to get a claim staked out?" Joe wanted to know.

"Yes, in spite of Hardrock's generous offer. We cannot let his kindness set an unfortunate precedent. After some more territory has been built, and the quota of prospectors has been increased, I have no doubt Saint Peter would be glad to let you two gentlemen go in together as partners, if that is what you wish. But for the time being, we can't find you quarters here. However, there are some other sections of Heaven which are not filled up yet. You can either join one of them, while you wait for an opening here, or you can remain unclassified and float around on a cloud and play a harp—pardon me, I mean your harmonica—if you like."

Joe shook his head. "Can't help it, but I feel plumb silly skitterin' about on one of them fancy clouds blowin' a mouth organ. I admit it's fun for a while, but I got to get my teeth into a man-sized job."

Hardrock and Joe talked things over for a while longer, and agreed that they would go into partnership when an opening occurred. Then Joe decided to go back to headquarters with Pete, for Pete was beginning to get a little worried about why Joe's halo didn't fit him. It didn't look right, around his neck, and passing angels were obviously amused, though they tried not to stare. "It ought not to do that," said Pete. "I am sure there is something wrong, and I will have to ask Saint Peter to get a more thorough check on the records. Why don't you flit around a bit near the office while I check up on this?"

BACK at the office, Joe decided he would go back out through the gates while he waited, to see how Ceopatra was. He found the burro in high spirits, with her belly full, and trying to kick a hole in the rear wall of the checking station. All worries about this donkey off his mind, Joe sat down and leaned against one of the gates while he thought over all the amazing things that had happened to him today. That prospector section of Heaven sure looked mighty good to him, and he wondered if there wasn't some way he might get in after all.

After a bit he approached Gary the gate-man and asked if he could send in a note to a friend. "Why certainly," was the reply, and the little man handed him a pad and pencil.

Joe tediously scrawled a few lines, and the checker summoned a cherub and dispatched the little fellow with the message. Joe leaned beside the gate, to doze and wait.

Pretty soon the gate opened, and through it came a prospector leading his fully packed burro. The man carried a canteen and miner's pick, and had a little carbide lamp fastened to his belt loop. He appeared to be in a great hurry, and hastily presented a slip of paper at the checking station, then scurried off down the trail leading below. Joe noticed for the first time that the trail up which he had come only this morning was a narrow and precipitous thing, winding tortuously down a craggy bluff bristling with scrub cactus and mesquite, to disappear in darkness a short way beyond.

Pretty soon out came another prospector, in a great hurry, and another, then another. One by one these men came to present their slips to the checker, and Joe supposed they were passes. Without exception the men looked suspiciously about, as though afraid of being followed, and upon seeing Joe, suddenly became very casual, appearing to be much interested in the scenery. Then they nonchalantly wandered down the path, but just before getting out of sight, appeared to hurry again.

It seemed hours that Joe loitered by the gate, while an apparently endless procession of prospectors streamed past the checking station. At last, long after the others had gone, appeared one more, leading a bedraggled capitalist and two burros.

"Hardrock," cried Joe. "You ain't a goin' too, are you?"

Hardrock looked covertly around, then spied Joe. He left his little cavalcade in the trail, and stepped over to Joe. An enormous hairy paw framed his guttural whisper as he stuck his mouth to Joe's ear. "Don't tell a soul, but I am after the chance of a lifetime. Somebody sent word in that there's been a whale of a gold strike down in Hell, and it leaked out. I'm goin' down there and make my stake! You better go in there and get yourself a pass and come with me!"

Joe sadly shook his head. "Hardrock, you're makin' a mistake. Believe me, you better not be goin' off down there now. . . ."

"I gotta hurry, Joe. Are you a comin'? Better git a move on if you are."

"Sorry, but I can't, Hardrock. Let me tell you somethin' . . ."

"Can't wait," called the traveler over his shoulder, as he stepped back into the trail. "I gotta be goin' before the pay dirt's all staked out. Be seein' you!" and with a wave of his hand he was gone.

JOE watched the little column until it had disappeared, then shrugged his shoulders sadly, and went to the checking booth again. He asked Gary if there would be any chance now of his getting into the prospector section of Heaven.

The benevolent little man looked suspiciously at him for a moment, then his kind nature got the better of his thoughts, and he said. "Certainly. I am sure there must be lots of room there now. Every prospector I know of has gone to Hell. Why don't you just go back inside the gate. I am sure Saint Peter will provide some one to direct you."

"I kin find the way there myself." Joe said, and proceded to take Cleopatra's lead rope. They trudged through the gates, and Joe looked around for Pete, but decided he must still be closeted with the boss. "No use of waitin' to pester him, I reckon," he thought. "I know all I need to know already. If the prospectors is all gone, they don't want their claims no more, and I should have my pick." He pulled out his harmonica and played a

few cheerful tunes as he tramped through the other districts between the gate and the hills.

It wasn't such a long time later that the gate man was greatly surprised to see Joe's wizened figure come trudging back through the gate, his droopy halo hanging over one shoulder, his canteen over the other, and leading a fully packed Cleopatra. Joe sheepishly handed him a pass. But Gary was burning with curiosity.

"Pardon me, but I can't help being surprised. Why are you leaving so suddenly? Is there something unsatisfactory? If anything was wrong, I would be glad to report it to the management."

"No, mister, not a thing is wrong," Joe assured him. "Not a thing. Only I been doin' some thinkin', and decided maybe there might be somethin' to that story about the gold strike in Hell! Well . . . I have to be movin'! Sure glad to have met you." And with his donkey he hurried on down the trail.

Joe was in such a hurry to reach his destination that he was not listening, or he would have heard an excited, "Hey, Joe, there's been a mistake! Come back with that halo! Hey . . ."

But Pete had dashed out the pearly gates with his message just a little too late to rectify whatever the mistake was. For Joe and Cleopatra were no longer to be seen.

THE next thing Joe knew, he was wide awake, and rain in torrents was beating against his neck. He turned his head and got a vision of cloud swollen skies, as he reached for his hat. It had fallen off his head when he had collapsed at the side of the dry hole in the arroyo bottom, and now he found it was nearly half full of precious rain water. He sloshed it to his face, and blessed life-giving liquid poured through his cracked lips and down his parched throat. He remembered it was unsafe to drink too freely after such a dry period, so after a moment he raised his head, and looked for Cleopatra. She was happily drinking her fill from a rain puddle a few feet farther up the arroyo.

He knew he would have to move his weary body, in case the arroyo should flood, and he started to rise. His hand sank into the now wet gravel at the edge of the hole he had dug, and he looked down. The overdue July rain had washed many of the gravel particles clean, and now he saw what his glazed eyes had missed a short time before. Three or four amorphous chunks the size of black walnuts gleamed rakishly at him with a golden glitter. Never, in thirty years of prospecting, had Joe seen the like of such gold nuggets. . . .

THE END

A TALE OF LOST ATLANTIS

"ORPHAN OF ATLANS"

By

WILLIAM LAWRENCE HAMLING

READ IT IN THE BIG FEBRUARY ISSUE

AMAZING STORIES

ACES AGAINST BULLETS

by Leonard Finley Hilts

There was a gasp in the room and then deadly silence

TED DILLON leaned against the polished wood bar and sniffed at the air. There was a tension in it that he couldn't see, but could almost smell, and certainly could feel. He didn't know the answers yet, since he had only arrived in town a few hours before on the afternoon stage. But he knew there was trouble around.

That might be good for his business. And then again, it might not.

If it weren't he was due for a long stay in Twin Pines. He had enough cash left in his pockets to pay for his meals and hotel room for a few days, and after that he would be flat. The Faro Kid, Ted Dillon, once the fanciest dealer on the Mississippi, stranded in a town hundreds of miles west of the big river and broke! And he couldn't play cards on credit.

He surveyed the big bar room, lavish with crystal chandeliers and ornate woodwork, and wondered how he could pick up some sizeable cash. But no promising ideas struck him.

There were aces on the table, and bullets in the guns. Which were going to be trumps was the question

The saloon was filling up now. A couple of Mexican waiters roamed among the tables taking orders from the men. The bar, not as fancy as the rest of the room, was against the back of the big room, and a long aisle ran from it, between the tables, to the swinging half-doors at the front.

Dillon realized, as he stood at the bar looking for an opportunity, that the aisle was more than just an aisle. It was more like a border between two warring nations. There were two distinct groups of people in the saloon, one on each side of the aisle, and the looks that flew back and forth between the groups carried sparks of animosity.

To his right, the tables were occupied by a tough, scarred, noisy bunch of gun toters who were drinking heavily, evidently celebrating something. To his left, across the aisle from this bunch, sat a group of quiet, sullen men. They were pretty well dressed and seemed respectable. Dillon noticed that they spent a lot of time brooding. And

when they talked, it was with tight lips, in tense low voices.

Off hand Dillon guessed that the men on the left were ranchers. They had that look. The rowdy bunch on the right could be anything, from rustlers to bank robbers. They didn't look like the type who knew anything about an honest dollar.

No one in the room paid any attention to Dillon as he lounged against the bar. If they saw him at all they ignored him. He was a small, frail man, five feet five and a hundred and twenty pounds, with a weak, pointed chin and the hands of an artist. His hair, once coal black, was now after forty-five years assuming the color of pig iron.

All in all, he was the type of man you could see a dozen times and never be able to remember. He was intelligent. Which was just the way Ted Dillon wanted to be.

THE eyes were the only indication of what the little man really was. They were a clear blue, sharp and cold as an iceberg. There were shrewd crowsfeet at their corners, and they moved fast when he looked around the room. They didn't actually look, they stabbed at something, saw it, and then stabbed somewhere else. But the biggest thing about his eyes was the calm confidence in back of them.

His name was Ted Dillon now. But for twenty years it had been the Faro Kid. During those twenty years he had ridden the side wheelers and stern wheelers from New Orleans to St. Louis, dealing Monte and Poker in the spacious lounge rooms of the big boats.

Each trip he accumulated a wad from those passengers who cared to join in a friendly little game. But when he got back to New Orleans it was also the same story. In a week all of his winnings would be lost over the Faro tables of the city and he'd have to start over. His constant losing streaks brought him the name Faro Kid and it stuck until he had to leave the river.

The weak face and slight build had been his biggest assests in his river days. Because of them he didn't look like the professional gambler that he was. Rich travellers would play with him when they wouldn't touch a card with anyone else on the boat.

But there had been trouble on one of the boats one night, and two men had been shot. The Faro Kid hadn't done the shooting, but rumor had it that he had caused the incident indirectly. So he left the river, feeling that it was getting unhealthy. An epidemic of lynching fever seemed to be coming on. He packed his carpet bag, headed west and became Ted Dillon once again.

And now he was going broke in Twin Pines. Something had to be done. With his forefinger he flagged the bartender down.

"What's the deal here?" He motioned toward the smoke filled saloon and the divided tables. "I smell trouble."

The bartender looked him over closely, deciding whether or not to throw him out for snooping. But his eyes took in the small build and the harmless face with the weak chin and decided that the little guy was just curious. Couldn't cause any trouble if he wanted to. He leaned across the bar so that his voice wouldn't carry.

"The tough hombres are Hall Jackson's men," he said in a low voice. He seemed disappointed when Dillon showed no reaction to Jackson's name. "Jackson," he pointed out with a touch of pride, "runs Twin Pines and the whole valley around it. The ranchers don't like it. Those sour faced men over there are some of them."

Dillon's eyes continued to stab around the room. He asked from the side of his mouth, "Is he dealing from the bottom of the deck?"

The bartender squinted at him sharply for a moment and then grinned. "You know that pass you come through on the way to town? Well, it's the only road into the valley. And nothing passes through there without Jackson's say so. The only hauling company that comes through there is the one he owns."

The little man pursed his lips. "The rest I can guess. All the supplies for the town come that way. He runs the prices way up and puts the profit in his sock. That right?"

"Yeah. And when the cattle from the valley go to market they gotta go through the pass too." He looked wise. "At so much a head."

"He's got 'em aces to kings," Dillon commented with a touch of professional admiration in his voice. "Pretty slick deal."

"These are some of his tax collectors," the bartender said. "Jackson and the rest of them are out hunting down Moxley, the sheriff. He's goin' to be buried tonight."

The bartender said it so matter-of-factly that Dillon jumped.

"Hell," the apron man shrugged, "it happens all the time. The sheriff was supposed to be working for Jackson, but he tried to help the ranchers smuggle supplies in without paying Jackson's tariff. Jackson will bring his star and guns in here in a little while. Then Twin Pines will be ready for a new sheriff."

DILLON was silent for a while, thinking this cold proposition over. Perhaps, he thought, he has chosen the wrong town in which to make his last stand. The stakes he had been able to pick up since leaving the river were pretty meager. It was high time he made a killing.

But his share of the pot in Twin Pines might easily be a pine box. And his interest in pine boxes at the present was at a minimum.

The bartender stood watching him for a minute and then went off to wait on another customer.

The sharp, ice-blue eyes searched through the ranchers on their side of the room, then flicked over to Jackson's men across the aisle. An idea began to present itself to him. He pushed it away at first, but it kept coming back, so he thought it over. It was one of those propositions where you either won or were buried, and he didn't like that.

But the scarcity of spending money in his pockets forced the decision. There was a chance for a good stake here if he played it shrewdly. If he didn't he would be joining forces with a lot of dead sheriffs. The idea might work if . . . it was an awful big *if*.

Dillon's gaze settled on the table where the biggest group of ranchers sat. There were ten of them, and he watched them as they talked. After a few minutes he saw that most of the conversation was directed toward one man.

That would be the man he wanted to talk to.

"That's Sam King," the bartender told him when he asked. "Biggest rancher in the valley. Owns the T-Bar spread. He's goin' broke fast."

Dillon thanked him, then asked as if it were a second thought. "Is there much card playing around here?"

"Jackson and some of his men play a lot," the barkeep replied. "Nobody else is much in the mood for it these days. Why?"

Dillon looked disinterested. "Just

looking for some way to occupy my time, that's all. Thanks."

Slowly he walked over to the table where Sam King was sitting and leaned over the shoulder of the rancher to speak close to his ear. King turned around and looked at him.

His glance travelled over Dillon's unimposing features and his face hardened. "Beat it and don't bother me," he said. "I got enough troubles as it is. What kind of a proposition could *you* offer *me?*"

Dillon pulled up an empty chair and sat next to King. "The bartender tells me," he said, "that you and the rest of the ranchers would like to get rid of Hall Jackson. I could do it for you."

King looked him up and down, and then snorted. "I'll bet you could! And so could the army!"

"You don't want to get rid of him very bad. That's obvious."

"Hell," King grunted, "anybody could ambush the snake. I could myself a long time ago. But that won't do any good. There's too many of his lieutenants ready to take over. You've got to kill them all at once. If you don't, not a ranch house in the valley would be safe from fire and pillage. And I love my wife and kids, so forget it."

Dillon sat calmly looking at him. He watched the way King talked in staccato bursts, the way the corners of his mouth were drawn, the way his fingers clenched and unclenched. Here was a man who had been forced to the exploding point.

"For ten thousand dollars I'll get rid of Hall Jackson and his whole gang within twenty-four hours." It was a flat confident statement uttered in a dry, unemotional voice.

THE quality of Dillon's voice brought King's attention around quickly. He looked at the small man and for the first time noticed the cold eyes. He remeasured Dillon. He still didn't like the small physique and the weak face, but those eyes and that voice, they were something else again.

"How?" he demanded.

Not a muscle on Dillon's face moved. "That's for me to decide. For ten thousand dollars I'll get rid of Hall Jackson and his bunch for you. That's all. It's a yes or no proposition."

King chewed on his lower lip and looked thoughtful. Then he said, "Ten thousand is a lot of money. I can't raise it."

Dillon just looked at him.

"At least I can't by myself," King amended quickly.

"That's better," Dillon said. "Ten thousand is my price. In a minute it'll be higher. I won't risk riding in a coffin for a smaller ante."

There was a harried, haggard look in King's eyes. "I'll have to talk it over with the other ranchers, of course."

The small man continued to stare at him steadily. "Then tell them that the price is fifteen thousand."

King's already taut nerves jumped at this. "Why you sawed off little coyote! I'll hang your . . ."

Dillon stood up. "The price is twenty thousand and I'm going up to the bar for a drink. If you want to talk to me about it later, I'll be there."

He left the table before King could say any more and resumed his position at the bar, leaning on the polished wood and looking over the divided crowd with speculative eyes. Little beads of perspiration popped out on his forehead as he thought the situation over.

He had to play his cards close with King, talking fast all the way. And when he was settled the tough part started. He had Jackson to deal with. With a pair of deuces in his hand, he was going to try to bluff a natural full

house. That was tough poker in any man's game, especially one where the pot was apt to be a bellyful of .44 slugs.

His scheme depended on five breaks, in each of which he had a fifty-fifty chance. He didn't compute the odds against his success on the spot, but he realized unhappily that they were heavily against him.

But a pile of money meant New Orleans and the Faro tables again. The river would be cooled off now, and the lynching fever would have passed. So the odds didn't bother him too long.

He saw that an animated conversation was in progress on the ranchers' side of the room. The discussion centered about King, but Dillon couldn't tell which way the rancher was coaxing the other men. On the other side of the room Hall Jackson's men were getting drunk. That was all right with Dillon. It might help him later.

King detached himself from the discussion among the ranchers and came up to the bar.

"The boys want to know what you're going to do," he said. "They figure they got that much comin' for their twenty thousand."

Dillon didn't look at King. His eyes continued to stab around the saloon. He had ordered a drink, but the shot glass at his elbow was still full. Finally he said, "The price is twenty-five thousand, and they know all they're going to know right now. With Jackson and his bunch out of the way, the ranchers of this valley will have that much in a couple of months."

King stared at him with a purple flame crawling up his neck. "I'll see you in hell before I'll give you that much." He turned abruptly and walked away from the bar.

DILLON let him take three steps and then said, "I'll be around to see you in a couple of weeks, King. By then you'll be a cow-hand on your own ranch working for Jackson. It won't be long before he owns the whole valley."

It was a shot in the dark. Dillon had noticed the nervousness and tension in King and had decided that it belonged to a man who was faced with a quick ruin. He watched King's back with narrowed eyes to see the effectiveness of his guesswork.

King stopped short and stood very still for a moment. Then he spun around and strode back to the bar.

"All right," he rasped in a harsh voice. "You win. The whole valley is almost done. Something has to happen and happen fast. So you . . ."

Dillon nodded. "Hall Jackson's gang will be gone from the valley by sun-up. I'll see you tomorrow to collect."

"If anything happens," King snarled at him, "so that Jackson and his men go on a rampage and attack the ranch houses, you can expect . . ."

"I can expect to have been shot by Jackson long before you could do anything about it. How much have you in your wallet?"

"Why?"

"Because I'm going to need some money tonight. Give me your billfold."

King glared at him and took a step backward. "You'll get paid tomorrow," he snapped. "And not before."

Dillon turned around and showed his back to King. "You can forget the whole deal, then."

There was a long moment of silence, during which Dillon sloshed the whiskey in his shot glass around and spilled half of it on the bar. Then King tapped him on the shoulder.

"How much do you need?"

"Couple of hundred."

King reached into his pocket and pulled out a fistful of bills. "Here. But,

by God, you'd better show something for this."

In the street outside of the saloon a lot of noise started. The two men glanced through the half doors and saw that a group of horsemen had ridden up and were dismounting.

Dillon grabbed King's sleeve. "Listen, watch for my signal later on in the evening. When I nod my head at you, get out of here and see that the rest of your men do, too."

King nodded curtly and walked quickly back to his table. He was seated before Hall Jackson had pushed the doors of the saloon open.

The minute Jackson came in, Dillon knew him. His suit was expensively cut, the kind he had seen bankers wearing on the river boats, but never saw out west. And he wore a white shirt, which by itself marked him as a man of some prominence in a town like Twin Pines. He topped it off with a flat crowned sombrero and two guns at his hips.

In the doorway of the saloon he held up a gun and a star for the rest of his gang to see. They cheered at the sight. Then he marched up the aisle to the bar and passed the last of the dead sheriff's worldly effects across to the bartender.

The bartender hung them on a nail over the back bar and pulled a sign from a drawer and hung it up along side them. It read:

WANTED
SHERIFF FOR TWIN PINES
MUST KNOW HIS BUSINESS
SEE MR. HALL JACKSON

JACKSON settled at a table near the bar and began telling the story of how they ran down the sheriff. Dillon looked toward the ranchers and saw that to a man they were watching him and not paying any attention to Jackson's tale.

Dillon kept his eyes shifting around the room, but they dropped to Jackson's table frequently. Would he or wouldn't he? If he didn't decide to play there was a little chance of collecting the money from the ranchers in the morning.

Finally, after several rounds of drinks, Jackson leaned back in his chair and told the bartender to toss him a fresh deck of cards. The table was cleared, and four other men sat down with Jackson.

Dillon watched and saw that they were dealing poker. That was it! Now to go into action.

He waved the aproned bartender down again.

"Suppose I could get in that game?"

"Maybe."

"Stiff stakes?"

The barkeep nodded. "Pretty high."

"Who are they?"

"That's Hall Jackson himself there. And the others are Tim Ferguson, Ben Fowler, Jake Dodge and Marty Kane. They're Jackson's big men."

Dillon eyed the table for a minute. Then his glance shifted to the spot in back of the bar where the fresh decks of cards were kept. He measured the distance to them carefully and decided that he could make it. He looked back at the barkeep.

"Ask 'em if they could use another hand."

The bartender stared at him and then went around the bar shaking his head. He bent over Jackson's shoulder.

While he was talking, Dillon took two quick steps down the bar and reached over in back of it. He scooped up four new decks of cards from the box and slipped them into the side pockets of his coat. He went back to where he had been standing before, but now left his hands in his pockets where they were

busy unwrapping the new decks.

He now had four decks of cards exactly like those being used in the game on the table. It was a good start.

Jackson looked around and waved to him to come over. Dillon walked over slowly.

"Understand you're a stranger in town," Jackson said, "and want to play some cards." His voice was deep and seemed to echo somewhere in his chest before coming out.

"That's right," Dillon answered. "Not much else to do around here and I enjoy a friendly little game. Thought maybe you wouldn't mind an extra hand."

Jackson's eyes took in Dillon's face and build. He reacted the way everyone else did. Just a harmless little guy who likes to play cards.

"We play for pretty good money," he said.

Dillon shrugged. "That keeps the game interesting. I've got enough to stay for a while. If my luck sticks, I'll stay until you're through."

Jackson waved him into a chair. "Okay. Tim, deal him in this hand. We've been cutting each other's throats so much it'll be a pleasure to have some fresh money in the game for a change."

Maneuvering into his chair, Dillon glanced at the ranchers. They were still watching him, now with quizzical and unpleasant looks. They couldn't figure out what was going to happen, and they didn't like his playing cards with the enemy. Dillon wished they'd look somewhere else. It wasn't smart, staring like that. Jackson might become suspicious.

THE stakes were high, as the bartender had promised and Dillon's cards were bad. In four hands he lost all but a few dollars of what he had in his pocket. He began to think that this was going to be even a tighter squeeze than he had anticipated.

In between deals his hands moved to the pockets of his coat. He consulted his watch half a dozen times, pulled out tooth picks and thew them away almost as soon as they were in his mouth, and searched diligently for a handkerchief. No one else at the table seemed to notice his activity.

The fifth deal was his. He shuffled the cards carefully and then began to pass out the cards in rapid fashion. He sat up close to the table and held his hands close to his vest as he dealt. His eyes stayed high, looking from one player to another.

It was dealer's choice and he had called for five card draw. After the deal, everyone seemed optimistic about his hand because the betting was spirited. It took the last of the money in his pocket to stay with it.

The men called for their cards and Dillon passed them out. He watched carefully over his cards as each man fitted his hand together. As each saw what he had the air in the room seemed to thicken. Faces froze into set poker attitudes. Eyes became shifty, and every man at the table strained to suppress himself.

Sensing the sudden tension around the table, Dillon relaxed a little. His deal had worked. He had dealt hands like this a lot of times before, but never when bullets might be the pay off.

The betting started again. Marty Kane tossed in a stiff bid, and Tim Ferguson raised him. Quickly Jake Dodge, Ben Fowler and Jackson threw in their raises. It came to Dillon. He looked at the size of the pot sadly and then glanced up at the faces watching him.

"Looks to me as though there's a lot of power around the board. I don't think I can buck it. Count me out."

Jackson was impatient to get on with the game. He said, "Okay. What do

you say, Marty?"

Dillon threw his cards in and turned his head. From his table on the ranchers' side of the saloon, King was watching him. Dillon looked him in the eye with meaning and nodded his head very slightly. King stood up and sauntered from the room. In twos and threes the rest of the ranchers followed his example. Inside of a few minutes the other side of the room was empty.

The word spread around through Jackson's men that a red hot hand was being bet. They quieted down and turned in their chairs to watch the table. None of them approached it, evidently because they had orders not to kibitz on the boss's games, but everyone watched. The room became so quiet that the voices of the bettors could be plainly heard.

Every man met the previous bet and raised it. The pile in the middle of the table rose rapidly. The money on the table and the cut-throat raising began to have its effect. Dillon smiled to himself. The hands that held the cards were shaking, the voices that kicked the raises up another notch were no longer calm.

Dillon pushed his chair back from the table and brought his legs under him so that he could move fast when things started to happen. He guessed that by now there was close to eight thousand dollars in the pot, and it was still going up.

The air in the room was quivering. The players were breathing audibly. And delay in the betting irritated them. Instead of being like five friends playing poker, they were like wild animals, ready to jump at each other.

The strain was telling heaviest on Jackson. His bets were being kicked up badly, and there was no respect being shown for his authority. He obviously didn't like it.

THE tension of the game built up, then doubled itself, and kept on building until it was almost unbearable. Fowler threw a particularly heavy raise at Jackson and was rewarded with a venomous glare. Jackson met the challenge and passed it on defiantly. The betting went around the table again. It was no longer a display of card playing. Now it was a question of guts.

"Will you stand back of your hand like a man or quit like a coward?" was the question each man seemed to ask the others at the table when he threw in his raise.

When the bet reached Jackson again the tension around the table had reached the snapping point.

"I'll call you, Fowler," Jackson growled as he put his money in the pot. "Even up the pot," he ordered the others at the table.

Fowler snarled at him. "You can't call off the betting. We're not finished. If you're afraid to stay, then get out and we'll get on with the game."

"I said pay up!" Jackson rasped, slamming his fist into the table. "You heard me!"

Four steady glances met his and openly accused him of being a coward. Nobody made a move. The defiance infuriated Jackson. He returned the stares for a long minute. Then he stood up.

"Lay down your hand, Fowler," he said in a brittle, dangerous voice. "I want to see what you've got."

Dillon pushed back a little farther from the table and glanced at the men around the room. They were standing now, looking as angry as the men at the poker table. Furthermore, Dillon noticed with satisfaction, they had divided into groups. That was something he had played for, figuring that each of the men at the table would have his own following that would side

with him in case of trouble.

Ben Fowler threw down four aces and a king.

"All right, you yellow bastard, beat that!" His hands went for the stacked money in the center of the table.

Jackson gaped at the hand and then roared. "You conniving skunk! Get your hands off that pot!" He pushed his chair back so hard it spun up against the bar. "Pull aces out of your sleeve on me, will you!" His right fist plowed into Fowler's face.

Fowler caught the blow squarely and flew backwards out of the chair, landing on the floor. The other men at the table jumped to their feet, but by that time Jackson had a gun in each fist.

"That pot's mine," he shouted, "Fowler stacked those aces. I've got four aces in my hand."

Tim Ferguson looked at Jackson. He kept his eyes on those of his boss as he put both arms out toward the pot.

"Jackson, I've got aces, too. Only I know mine were dealt to me. I think you did some sleeve work yourself. If you want this pot you'll have to take it from me."

The gun in Jackson's right fist exploded and Ferguson screamed and fell back from the table. The shot and the scream seemed to be the signal. Other guns flashed out. Dodge fired four shots into Jackson and watched him fall. Someone hit the poker table and it turned over. The other men around the room had drawn and were firing at anyone who doubted the righteousness of their particular champion.

THE sound of gunfire and yells of pain filled the saloon, and smoke from the guns clogged the air. Men fired, were hit, and continued firing as they fell. The front windows broke with a loud crash and tables and chairs slammed against the walls.

Gradually the shots subsided and within ten minutes after the fight had started absolute quiet reigned over the saloon.

Ted Dillon lay on the floor in back of the bar. At the first sign that guns were being drawn he had ducked out of the way fast. Now as the noise died out, he carefully threw the remnants of the four extra decks into the garbage bucket under the bar. The aces from those decks, judiciously dealt, had served him well.

As soon as everything was quiet out in front, Dillon came out of his hiding place. The saloon was a total wreck. There was nothing left of the tables and chairs, or of the ornate chandeliers. The walls and woodwork were punctured and cracked by the flying bullets and the glassware in back of the bar was a pile of broken pieces.

Every man of Hall Jackson's gang, including the leader himself, had been hit during the fight. They lay around the room on the floor amidst the wreckage. Most of them were dead, but a few were barely alive enough to groan.

In swift practiced movements, Dillon knelt down near the poker table and began scooping up the money from the pot that had scattered when the table went over. He stuffed it into his pockets without counting it. He had just finished when the half doors at the front of the saloon were cautiously pushed open. King stuck his head in.

Dillon waved his hand around the room. "The bodies are all yours, King. Jackson's dead and so are most of the rest."

King, followed by the other ranchers pushed into the saloon and stared unbelievingly at the holocaust around them. Their eyes went from the weak face and small body of Dillon to the

wreckage and then back to Dillon again. It was difficult to understand how such a mild appearing man could cause so much damage in so short a time.

The sight of the carnage began to tell on Dillon's stomach. He was beginning to feel peculiar in that region. The ranchers pressed forward now, to question and congratulate him, but he pushed them aside and made for the door. He wanted to get outside before something happened.

As he pushed the doors open King shouted after him. "Hey, wait a minute. How'd all this happen? How'd you do this?"

Dillon stopped in the doors and shouted back, "I played aces against bullets and won. The sheriff's star and gun are above the bar, King. You're elected . . . whups. . . ."

He made a sudden lunge into the street and the doors swung closed behind him.

THE END.

ANSWERS TO CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

(Quiz on page 83)

1. Black Bart, a gentleman bandit, who preyed on California stage coaches, beginning his career about the year 1877.
2. Straight bucking is when a bronc pitches in one spot.
3. Henry Plummer, notorious desperado, was hanged January 10, 1864.
4. William Antrim was sometimes called Billy Bonny and was known more frequently as Billy the Kid.
5. A reata is a rope.
6. Joaquim Murieta was frequently termed the "Robin Hood of Eldorado."
7. John A. Murrel, a renowned bandit chieftain, was known as the king of musical comedy outlaws, because of his gentleman manners and dignified dress.
8. A peeler is an expert who breaks a bronc.
9. The "Terrible Harpes" were two brothers. They were called "Big Harp," and "Little Harp." They were the worst of an outlaw crew who operated on "The Wilderness Road," in Kentucky, about 1797.
10. Dick Yeager, a chief of an outlaw band, who operated in the Cherokee Strip in 1894. Yeager was described as being a very handsome man with a magnetic personality, especially to women.
11. Annie McDougal and Jeannie Metcalf, known respectively as Cattle Annie and Little Breeches, were outlaw girl bandits who hung out with the Doolin gang.
12. A hackamore is a bitless rope bridle, a single rein.
13. A hot roll is the cowboy's bedding.
14. Bill Doolin. He was with the Dalton gang when they started for Coffeyville, Kansas, to pull the robbery which caused their downfall. On the way there Doolin's horse went lame, and he had to stop. The Dalton gang rode on without him.
15. None. A pony splashed with several colors is known as a pinto or a paint horse.
16. Savvy means to understand.
17. Bill Doolin.
18. Tailings are stragglers from the herd.
19. William Frederick Cody, later known as "Buffalo Bill," was born February 26, 1846, near LeClair, in Scott County, Iowa.
20. Edward Creighton.

TRIGGERMAN FROM TEXAS

By DWIGHT V. SWAIN

"STATE of Texas versus Ben Thompson," droned the clerk. "Charge of murder."

A heavy silence settled over the dusty little courtroom. The scattered spectators loafing on the long benches hunched forward with sudden interest.

The judge peered out over the audience. "Where's the prisoner, sheriff?" he demanded irritably. "We can't wait all day, you know."

A thunder of hoof-beats on the courthouse steps cut short the sheriff's explanation. The double doors burst open. Into the room, spurs

jingling, rode a heavily-built, square-jawed man with flashing blue eyes and thick black hair and mustache. Reining up his horse, he surveyed the court contemptuously.

"Good mornin', gents!" he greeted them. "I'm Ben Thompson. Heard you were lookin' for me, so I came in to see what the trouble was." He grinned ferociously, slapped the butts of his big .44's. "How about it, gents? Is there any charge against me on this court's docket? Speak up, now! Don't be bashful!"

The officials sneaked glances at each other. Sweat stood out in big beads on their foreheads.

"Well?" thundered the man on horseback.

The clerk found his voice at last.

"No charge, Mister Thompson," he quavered. "You're not wanted here at all."

That true episode typifies Ben Thompson, burly six-shooter expert of Texas' wild days. Law, order, authority, discipline—they were just words to him, even during the amazing period when he, himself, was marshal of Austin, the state's capitol city. From beginning to end of his murderous career as killer-second-to-none, his faith was pinned solely to his deadly skill with the Colts.

"He was the most dangerous of them all," the famous Bat Masterson declared in after years, as he looked back over the hundreds of bad men he had known.

Just where Thompson hailed from has never been learned. Some say Texas; others, England. He set the year of his birth as 1843, however, and admitted he had been a printer by trade. This occupation he soon abandoned for the easier life of a professional gambler and, on the side, picked up a reputation as an all-around bad man and killer.

When the War Between the States broke out, Thompson enlisted in the Confederate Army in Texas, bringing with him all his slaughterer's traits. He soon was caught stealing rations, and a sergeant demanded he return them. Instead, Ben shot the non-com. A lieutenant ran up to investigate. Again the killer's guns played the triple role of judge, jury and executioner.

Going "on the dodge" for a time to avoid court-martial, Ben eventually reenlisted. Breaking regulations right and left, he sneaked in liquor to sell his fellow-troopers, gambled constantly, and stirred up insubordination to the point of mutiny. He also was involved in several more shooting scrapes. Yet, despite all this, action never was taken against him for gunning down the sergeant and the lieutenant!

The war over, the killer lit out for Mexico to avoid punishment by Union forces for his misdeeds. For a time he fought under Shelby for the Emperor Maximilian. When this cause collapsed, he drifted back to Texas, thinking his old record would be forgotten.

He guessed wrong. Texas remembered. Ben was at once arrested for killing an Austin gunman named Coombs during his army days. When the jury voted to let him go, the prosecution at once brought out another old charge, this time one of having tried to kill a citizen called Brown. Convicted, Thompson went to jail for two years.

BEN'S most famous battle took place at Ellsworth, Kansas, on August 18, 1873. He was running a gambling house. On the side, he acted as protector of the Texas cowhands who came up the trail, all of whom were looked upon by the Kansas crowd as fair prey for any conceivable racket, from crooked card games to arrest on trumped-up charges for the sake of fines. The trail-riders responded by setting as their collective ambition the shooting of "damn" Yankee marshals.

Thompson had had trouble with a local gambler. Now, on the day mentioned, the man stood in front of the Texan's establishment and bellowed a challenge.

"Come on out and fight, you Texas——!"

No second dare was needed. Ben and his brother, Billy, charged into the street at the double, the former carrying a rifle, the latter a shotgun. Billy, half-drunk, blazed away at their challenger, but missed. His target was so scared, however, that he left Ellsworth without further discussion.

Now Town Deputy "Happy Jack" Morco and Deputy Sheriff Hogue—both of them bitter enemies of the Thompsons—began rounding up a mob. The Texas men, meanwhile, rallied to support Ben and his brother. An attempt by the two deputies to sneak up on the Texans was discouraged immediately by Ben's sharpshooting.

Sheriff C. B. Whitney, a friend of the Thompsons, came running up at this stage of the game to confer with the Texans. Together, he and the brothers walked down the street. Suddenly Ben sighted Deputy Morco sneaking up behind them. He whirled and fired. Billy, still dazed with liquor, tried to follow suit. Tripping, he pitched forward, discharging his shotgun into Sheriff Whitney's face and body, killing the officer.

Realizing that their enemies would accuse Billy of having killed the sheriff intentionally, Ben rushed his brother out of town. As for himself, he refused to submit to arrest by Acting Sheriff Hogue. A compromise finally was arranged under which he surrendered to Jim Miller, mayor of Ellsworth, whom he trusted. A condition of his surrender was that the opposition, too, be disarmed. In the end he was exonerated. Billy, captured three years later, was tried and acquitted.

Thompson was notorious for his hatred of "Wild Bill" Hickok, then city marshal of Abilene, Kansas. The feud began when Ben and a partner, Phil Coe, were running an Abilene saloon. Coe and Hickok clashed over a girl. When the lady favored Coe, Hickok—as deadly a pistoleer as ever stalked the west—swore vengeance. Later Coe violated a local ordinance against firing a revolver within the city limits. Hickok used it

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MISSION AT RED ROCK

BILL DEVORE came along the Sweetwater trail the day we were moving into the rectory at Red Rock Parish. A big, bearded man astride an ugly horse. He reined up where our wagon ruts left the trail and he looked in with fierce black eyes on the helter skelter of our settling. My mother, who was very stubborn about her convictions, snorted in the doorway of the dusty cabin.

"I told you there'd be no time for writing a book in this wilderness," she charged accusingly. "Neither bread nor meat for the table and the beds not yet off the wagon, but a likely sinner already at the gate!"

Father put down the tub of kitchen gear he was carrying from the wagon to the house and glanced out across the bright gray of sunlight on Wyoming sage.

"You're an intolerant wench, Ellen More," he said gently. "And a doubting one. We're no longer caught between the picket fences o' a town. This is the open country that God made and we'll savor it, once we've got a feelin' o' home in these hills. But recollect this, here a man does not wear the immortal soul of him in his hatband, to be marked at a distance like a ticket

by Tom W. Blackburn

The Rector of Red Rock found that writing a book, being a rector, and just plain living in the West were really three jobs

stub. Make the house ready for a guest. Yonder neighbor comes as a friend."

Mother's sniff was explosive.

"Any man I can smell that far off wears no wings!" she said positively.

But she turned into the cabin as though its litter was already reduced to the severe neatness which was her conception of household perfection, and she commenced that apparently meaningless fussing about which had always greeted a guest at the white painted rectory in the Iowa town where I was born. A fussing about which had meaning enough—as father well knew and as we children learned as we grew older—for it never failed to make a midday caller at the rectory feel that he might be intruding a little, that even a minister was entitled to the privacy and sanctity of his home, whether the roof was provided by parish funds or not.

Father started out toward the trail. A jaunty little man in a pair of very dirty overalls who betrayed his newness to this land by a slight stiffness in his usually quick step and the flood of perspiration which had soaked his shirt in the morning sun. He thrust out his hand to the huge man in the

saddle above him.

"If I'd known I ha' company before noon I would ha' put on my clerics to greet you, friend," he apologized with a smile only little men know how to use. "But a welcome to you and light down for tea. I am Roy More."

" . . the Reverend. Royal More . . . " Robbie amended owlishly, for she and the rest of us had followed down the wagon ruts after father and we stood behind him, now—a ragged, unwashed six member committee, doing service to its own curiosity.

The man in the saddle scowled down. I had surreptitiously consulted Nick Carter on The West and I feared the scowl was at mention of tea but I could not catch father's attention with my eyes and the man in the saddle was far too grim for me to risk a more overt signal.

"Why, damn!" said the man, and he made the word rich and expressive with the utter honesty of its booming anger. "So she's dragged a parson in on us! A blasted squeaking parson! But it won't work. Not by a jugful, it won't!"

Father's eyes narrowed, for he was not a quiet soul, himself, but he continued to smile.

"Maybe not," he agreed. "This parish has been an empty burden to the diocese a good while, but I ha' hopes o' a congregation here. Neighbors from the bottoms, folks from the ranches and from the sheep camps in the hills. Even a church may be possible in time—"

"A church!" the man in the saddle grunted. He leaned forward. "Mister, you listen. My name is Bill Devore—!"

FATHER'S expression did not change and we children were too engrossed to show more than interest though we had heard already this badman's name —a hill hunter and hermit, occasionally a sheep man but always a drinker and a trouble maker; a lawless man and a godless one.

"Then light down, Bill," father said pleasantly. "Tea's brewing—"

The big man spat with the wind, an angry and forceful gesture.

"Get out!" he said bluntly. "The whole caboodle. And I warn you if you hold one meeting I'll bring the boys down and Kate Crosson'll regret this scheme more'n the worst of the others she's tried. A parson and a church!"

He spoke savagely to his horse and rode off. Mother met us in the cabin doorway, a touch of triumph in her eyes.

" 'Tis a sign," she declared with a nod at the dust on the trail. " 'Tis a foolish thing, our being here. You're a man grown and with solemn duties, Royal More, and no boy kiting off to live under the stars with the Indians like he's dreamed. 'Tis the wages of a Scot's stubbornness and no godly work at all. There'll be wild men and wild talk and no church in this red valley till the end of time and you'll sit no bishop's chair by starving your family and running mortal risks of your own life and health in these empty hills."

But father only whistled softly to himself and lifted the shotgun from the wagon and went off down the bottoms. He was back in an hour and again at the task of unloading the wagon and we had a rabbit stew under a cornbread crust at sunset.

Kate Crosson, whose name we had heard from the man on the trail, came while there was still a little light, riding high on the seat of her buckboard like a man and stringing a line of gray dust across the evening sky. She brought mother a bundle of flour sacking for the making of young ones' underpants and a fat cake for us youngsters, but it was father she came to see.

We youngsters were grateful for Kate Crosson's cake and mother for her sack-

ing and father for a second caller on his first day in this new and wild place, but it was not these things which drew us to her. For I have made Kate seem older than she was and her bluffness more masculine than womanly and I should not do this. She was a big woman by More standards, fit for the bigness of the land and the task of bossing the crew on her ranch over the hogback from us. But the freshness of spring timber slopes was about her and the warmth of an August moon and there was a feminine devil alive in her splendid eyes.

She talked of the land and the people of those hills with the ease and simplicity of one who knew a great deal of both. Her deep voice was a joy to hear and her language alive with a color of its own. Long since assigned with the younger ones to a tick within the cabin, I lay awake to listen and heard her at last own up to the prime reason for her visit.

"There's a man in these hills, Reverend Roy," Kate said, "That needs his God like no mortal alive. A black hearted calf stealing son he is, with a hate for the world in his chest and a pair of fence-nippers in his pocket. He's a chore for a man of the gospel. Bring this devil his due and I'll see you've got a milk cow on your grass and a side of beef in your meat house."

" 'Tis a kindly offer of help," father said. "To get two such my first day gives me hope for the time ahead."

"Two?" Kate rumbled. "Who else in these hill gives a horned hooter's howl for the works of God?"

"A man named Devore was by before you, and he promised did I hold my first meeting he'd bring men out of the hills to it."

"Bill Devore?" Kate choked. "That bushy-faced saint of the sheepmen? It's a trick, then! He'd swipe the deal from me, that's all. And that after the long time he's spent learning he can't beat Kate Crosson! Men for the meeting, is it? To wreck it, then. But we'll have none of that. Send me word of your meeting. I doubt one of my boys can sing and I can't myself, but I'll bring my crew when the time comes. It was Bill Devore I was telling you of and I'll not be beat by the devil, himself!"

Kate left us then and father came into the cabin with mother. As they readied for bed in the darkness, I heard father speak out with a deal of sureness.

"We'll have us a fine new church in this valley, Ellen."

"A springhouse would be better," mother answered quietly, "For at least we've got a promise of meat to hang in it!"

DAYS passed swiftly, for being on land unbound by the ordered life of a town there were things father must do for the good of his soul and the sustenance of his family before he could minister to a new flock. While mother watched dwindling funds with a resigned desperation, the wagon returned often down the Sweetwater trail from the county seat with seed grain and garden gear, with a rifle and traps, with the tools of a new life. On these trips father dipped deeply into the willing talk of tradesmen, for he dearly loved gossip, and thus we came to share the county's knowledge of the two neighbors who had been our first callers at Red Rock.

Bill Devore had been the young foreman of the Walking C when Kate Crosson's father was yet alive. Bill and Kate had been one for the other, their tempestuous quarreling being no more than salt and leavening for the affection between them. But when old man Cros-

son died and the ranch became Kate's, there had been some kind of tangle between them which had sent Bill sulking off to join the drifters in the hills and which had set Kate to driving her crews so hard that a Walking C hand earned every dollar he drew.

When a complaint was lodged against a man in the high hills and the law made trouble for one of them, Bill Devore automatically assumed Kate was gunning for him again—and half the time he was right—so sooner or later a Walking C hand who carelessly rode a dark trail or hit town alone would come riding home with closed eyes and a swollen face, for Bill Devore was a handy man with his fists. And when a Walking C tally was short a few head of beef or a fence line was down, Kate was at the sheriff's door at any hour of the day or night, howling righteously for a posse to be turned into the hills against the bearded son who was stealing her blind. It was a stubborn thing on both sides and grim and relentless and the county judged to a man that one day the end of this quarreling would be written in blood, for there was still much of this kind of writing in Wyoming.

When father took the assignment at Red Rock and moved us into the neglected rectory with his enthusiasm for the wide wind and sun of the land, he moved us also into the middle of this feud between these two people of the valley. Mother worried as a woman can and saw no good to come of it but father only whistled and tramped the bottoms and built her a springhouse. And in the third week, when the stiffness was gone from father's step and the pattern of a garden plot lay clods and red earth up behind the cabin, Bill Devore came down again from the higher ridges. Father saw him at a distance and was waiting on the trail when he came up.

"I've been waiting long to see you, Neighbor Bill," he said without ever giving the dark faced one a chance at a word, "for my books don't say how deep a man should be planting his corn on these slopes."

"You think I'm a farmer?" was the surly answer.

"No, only that you know the country. For I've heard o' your work with the flocks on the hills and I know a man who's known as the saint o' the sheepmen would have little time to be fretting with the corn patch o' a greenhorn."

Devore frowned blackly, but there was a touch of puzzlement in his voice.

"And you know the nature of this work in the hills?"

"Wouldn't a priest o' any faith understand works which earn a man the name o' saint? I could make my guess. A sheep camp is no matter o' four solid walls and a hearth for comfort and cheer. And a sheepman is no beef grower with a square o' titled acres and a dozen riders behind him. There could be homeless men and friendless ones in the hills. A comradely hand to such would be saintly work."

Bill Devore quit his saddle on rectory land for the first time. He swung down and let his horse graze off into the growth beside the trail.

"If you lie, you lie good, Parson," he said. "If you guess, you guess sharp. You're first in the county as could ever see honest reason for sticking to the timber slopes or could find a fair word for the men of the camps. But I'm no saint and I'll have the name of him as called me such!"

"It could ha' been a confidence," father temporized, "For 'tis a fact a man or woman gives more o' his heart-thinking to a man of my calling than another. But 'twas Kate Crosson. She spoke ill o' the quarrel betwixt you and

named you saint o' the sheepmen, all to the same breath."

"Kate, eh?" Devore said slowly. "So it was Kate!" He broke off and glanced beyond the cabin to the raw, clumsily built box of the springhouse. "You fixed to buy meat?"

"There's been a side of Walking C beef promised me—when I hold my first service," father said.

"The first service, eh? The first crack at me through a parson's fists! And you starve till then. Kate Crosson's got a big heart—when she can use it in a trade!"

Bill Devore caught up his horse, mounted, and rode off. With the dying sun the mistress of the Walking C came again in her buckboard, stringing dust across the evening sky. But before then Bill had been back with a team from the hills and the corn had been sowed and neatly hilled in the garden patch.

"You've located that renegade in the hills, Reverend Roy?" Kate asked as she reached our porch. "You've let him know the hand of God is a'closing in on him?"

"I have," father agreed. "And I ha' seen a change worked already, for he listened and tithed as a good man should for the coming house o' God."

"Tithed? You'd work a miracle then —or you've been took in proper! A church is the work of the law abiding and a thing Bill would hate with all his contrary heart. If you got money or a stick of work from him it's a trick to do you in and me with you!"

Father shrugged.

"The corn patch is sowed," he said. "I plan to talk logs from the hills for a building when neighbor Devore rides this way again."

KATE went out to the garden patch and walked along the rows with furrows as deep as those in the red earth across her brow. From the patch she went to the knoll beyond where Mother had said a church should be if such could be built of sagebrush and a foolish man's hopes. Father went along, whistling, pacing here and there in the twilight, making lines in the dust to show how he'd build if he had the means. Kate listened silently and thrust sticks into the ground where the corners of father's lines came to a meeting. It was full dark when we returned to the porch.

"There's a mess of sandstone back of that knoll," Kate Crosson said, "and my smith at the ranch is a tolerable hand with wedges and a maul. I've got a man, too, as can lay stone block and I'll send him across with the smith, for I'll run no risk of thieves from the hills hauling in logs when there's no foundation to lay 'em on. Bill Devore'll be making a joke of how he built the church I aimed to use for running him out of the county unless I cheat him of his chance to make his boast."

"A thanks to you Kate," father said quietly. "You ha' brightened my faith. Yet I should ha' known it would be so, for I was told o' your generous nature."

"Who'd lie to a preacher?" Kate snorted.

"Neighbor Bill spoke only today o' the size o' your heart—"

Kate was long silent. Finally she drew on her stained stubby man's riding gloves. She looked up at us from the foot of the porch steps.

"It's been a long day since I've seen that son from the hills," she murmured.

"A fine figure of a man," father suggested softly. "And likely a strong face under that bush o' beard."

"Likely," Kate agreed with a dour derisiveness. She swung up into her buckboard and wheeled off. Father was still whistling reflectively to him-

self on the porch when I dropped off to sleep.

THE Walking C men were at work on the knoll before we had done with breakfast in the morning. Midway of the forenoon Bill Devore and two companions came fast down the Sweetwater trail. They seemed in haste, yet they halted abruptly and stared hard when they came abreast of the knoll. Devore reined across the flats to our dooryard.

"You've got trespassers on that hump, Parson," he told father sharply.

"I doubt it, neighbor," father answered. "Last I looked they were masons, working hard in the sun."

"They're hands off the Walking C!"

Father nodded.

"Laying stout foundation for the work o' God so's the stone'll be set by frost and winter logs can be raised atop it."

Bill Devore ran his hand through his beard, streaking the red paste of dust and sweat which underlay it.

"Winter logs are no good for sound building. They should be cut and let lay for a year's seasoning and then raised in the summer so's the heat'll turn 'em powder dry afore the roof goes on."

Bill paused and his hand scrabbled in his beard again, for the day was warm. Father leaned forward.

"A beard like that's near to fur and intolerably hot this kind of weather," he offered impersonally. "Ever think of trimming yours some, Bill?"

"No, and why should I?" Devore snapped. "It's my own. I got no bossing woman at home to complain of the scratch of it and I wear it by free right."

"Idle thought; idle talk," father said easily. "It was hinted you owned a strong face under it and 'twas my curiosity to see it."

Bill polished the horn of his saddle with his sleeve and reached for courage.

"Kate—again?" he muttered.

"Kate," father agreed.

Bill took an interminable time to build a cigarette there in the morning sun. He had drawn heavily upon it twice before he spoke again.

"I've not seen Kate in six years," he said slowly, "—nor her me—"

He loped out of the yard but I saw that although his companions rode on down the county seat way when he reached the trail, Bill turned back toward the hills, alone.

FOR the best of a week the Walking C men set their sandstone blocks along the lines Kate Crosson and father had drawn in the twilight on the top of the knoll. When they were done Kate came once to look at the stone but stayed no time for talk and after that the emptiness of the parish valley became a plaguing thing.

Father gave over his whistling and tramped the bottoms more often. We ate Kate's meat from the springhouse and drank the milk from her cow in the meadow, for she had not waited for a service to send these down to us, after all. But there was no traffic on the trail and the stonework on the knoll was a gaunt thing which troubled father and held mother silent and set even us younger ones to wondering. The corn in the garden patch broke through the red earth but these were endless days at the cabin and hopes died in the loneliness as the corn grew.

There is heat on Wyoming grass in midsummer and times when the bigness of the land is a fearful thing; times when it dwarfs any planning and the size of any man's heart and we lived through such a time in the rectory at Red Rock, bitterly tired of rabbit stew

and the shag cuts of Kate's side of beef —tired of the sun and the emptiness and the vast, vacant monotony of the nights.

But in the end there was again dust on the Sweetwater trail and out of it rolled a line of stripped down wagons with low slung lengths of axe squared timber. There were the stout axles of Studebaker farmer's wagons among them, but mostly they were the lighter skeletons on which sheepmen built the wheeled shacks in which they lived while their flocks were on the high grass. Patched affairs, grossly overloaded and too flimsy for this work. But they came, driven by grizzled men, unkempt and sweating and bringing with them the pungent, troubling smell of sheep.

They jolted up the slope past the cabin, discharged their loads, and creaked off again. This happened a second day and between times father walked up to look at the clean slabbed logs and came back shaking his head, for they were seasoned and sound. The third morning the dust brought no wagons but a mass of horsemen with the steel of tools winking at their saddle ties and while they clattered up the knoll Bill Devore rode across to our porch.

"Maybe a word's needed for the time it's taken, Parson," he said, "but spare hands are short in the hills. You've been a friendly man; you've done for yourself and asked for nothing. You've paid no mind to the business of others nor took to the gall of gossip. And you've had a good word for us in the hills. We're a remembering kind, so we've put a helping shoulder to your wheel."

"And found a stand of timber growing already squared and seasoned," father suggested drily. Bill Devore grinned, though it was a hard thing to see under his beard.

"A MAN might say," he agreed. "There's been squatters on the slopes afore you, but they'd hate sheep and drifter's camps and they'd ride wider'n their claims gave 'em right, so they didn't stay. But they left their cabins. There was only to knock down four-five of these for the best sticks. Old, they was seasoned and when we'd squared 'em they were clean. They'll do and we'll raise 'em, for the day isn't yet when the hills can't finish anything the Walking C can start!"

The hill men worked on their own time and drew no pay from a woman boss so their work was fast and prideful. In two days a church was on the knoll, a solid pine house of God against the red hills. When the work was done the men from the ridges sent no word but rode straight from the knoll to the trail and so were gone before we knew it. All of us followed father up through the twilight to see what they had built.

Mother had turned more gentle these last weeks, so that we all had noticed it, and her pride had grown vastly. Her eyes were luminous in the dying light and her hands had a biting grip on father's arm.

"Out of the wilderness it shall be raised, Roy—" she breathed, "—by the hand o' man for the use o' God. Wait till the bishop sees what's been done on this hill!"

Father shook his head with an unfamiliar sadness.

"There's more to it than log and stone, Ellen," she said, "for its empty inside o' a thing but sawdust and chips and little likelihood o' it gathering much else while there's hill and valley and sheep and beef and a man and woman with hate in their hearts. I did wrong, trying to build out o' connivery and scheming, for I was none so smart as I thought and I ha' failed. We'll be needing a transfer before fall. Tomorrow

I'll be writing the bishop—"

He broke off. It had been months, but a buckboard had wheeled into our yard and Kate Crosson came up past the garden patch toward us. For the first time since we'd known her she wore no man's shirt and levis but a faded dress that had a proud snug fit and she was a bright silhouette against the evening sky. Her eyes ran over the strong simple lines of the little church and her nostrils flared to the fragrance of the freshly worked timbers.

"Bill Devore did this, Reverend Roy?" she asked deep and very soft. "He chased those lazy devils out of the hills to this piece of work?"

Father nodded. There was silence. Mother spoke of the late hour and us children and offered tea but Kate was at the church doorway, her hand rasping softly along the neat framing there, unhearing, so father came along with the rest of us back to the cabin and we left her on the knoll in the darkness.

Robbie and Jeanie and the twins and Mike had been soaped and shined and tucked in bed. Mother was at work on me when Bill Devore rode quietly in from the trail.

"I'd no guess you'd have company, Parson—" he said awkwardly.

"But a neighbor on the knoll, admiring your work," father answered. "There's a thing I could do?"

I heard Bill Devore's weight drop into a chair on the porch.

"Seems as though," he agreed. "I was looking tonight and I reckon water's got to my war bag, for my razor's rusted shut and no good and I'm tired of itching from ear to snout in the sun. I've got no notion of the book of rules but its a long ride to town. Parson, could you shave a man?"

FATHER'S feet hit the floor hard. He came into the cabin and turned up the lamp with no thought of the light in the eyes of us children. He used the water mother had been steaming for tea and one of the best towels and his own precious razor, sent him straight from Manchester by an uncle there, and he shaved Bill Devore while we all watched silently. He shaved the man clean and steamed his face and stung it for a finish with a dash out of the bottle of violet water from the bureau which had been for as long as I could remember as forbidden to small hands as the shotgun in the corner.

With his face red and clean, with the strong, gentle lines about his mouth revealed and betraying him, Bill Devore muttered thanks and went again onto the porch. He found more words in the darkness there.

"I've been thinking of the roof," he said. "It could maybe leak. And a way to check it is to get under and try catching s t a r s h i n e through holes against a dark night sky like tonight. Do you reckon—?"

"I reckon, Bill—" father agreed. But when Bill had clumped on off up the knoll and father had come and mother asked him how in creation a man could find roof leaks on a thick black night like this, father only laughed and asked her for his pen and the well of ink. He found paper and sat down at the table. He wrote rapidly for a moment, then paused and looked up at mother.

"I was thinking, Ellen, should I offer the Bishop the first service and the ceremony of consecrating the new church and the wedding, all three—or should I hold back the last for myself?"

Mother tipped her head toward the knoll behind us.

"If I know a thing about those two up there, the only man they'd have for their marrying is no bishop—yet!"

Father smiled and dipped his pen and directly, while he wrote, he began to whistle as he had in our first days at Red Rock.

TRIGGERMAN FROM TEXAS

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as an excuse for killing him.

Ben—confined to his bed by an accident at the time—went berserk when he heard of the affair. "Phil wasn't a gun-fighter," he fumed. "Hickok just picked that fight to get him. Once I get up, though, he'll have his chance to fight *me!*"

The epic battle he planned never took place. When he at last recovered he had to return to Texas instead of shooting it out with the marshal. He nursed his grudge all his life, however, even going so far as to attempt to persuade John Wesley Hardin, another famous Texas outlaw, to kill Hickok for him.

Thompson's luck was famous all over the west. A heavy drinker, he still succeeded in outguessing and outshooting all those who opposed him. Probably his most astounding piece of good fortune took place while—after losing once—he was running for marshal of Austin a second time.

Mark Wilson was proprietor of the Senate Saloon. He and Ben had been feuding. One night Thompson entered the bar, started a row, and—when Wilson attempted to interfere—slapped the proprietor's face.

Raging, Wilson went into the back room and got a double-barreled shotgun. Rushing into the bar, he blazed away at Thompson with both barrels. Simultaneously, a bartender opened fire on Ben with a rifle.

Like lightning, the desperado whipped out his .44's. When the smoke cleared, both proprietor and bartender were down. The former was already dead, while the latter—hit in the neck by bullets penetrating the woodwork of the bar behind which he was hiding—soon followed his employer to Boot Hill.

Miraculously, Thompson came through the battle without a scratch! And, to cap the climax, the people of Austin responded to this slaughterfest by electing him marshal as soon as he had been acquitted of the killings!

NOT all of Ben's scrapes were such murderous affairs, of course, and despite his many faults he was very popular in some circles. When sober, he was polite, quiet-spoken, and noted for his loyalty, friendliness and dare-devil courage. Once a band of drunken cow-punchers jumped Bat Masterson in a saloon in Tascosa, Texas. A slug shattered Bat's knee. He pitched to the floor and the gang closed in to finish him.

But Ben, who was acquainted with Bat, sprang up from a faro table, Colts out.

"Back!" he roared. "Back—and drop those guns! This man's my friend. The first one to touch him dies where he stands!"

This same reckless chivalry was shown in the gun-fighter's first killing. It took place in New Orleans. A Frenchman tried to force his attentions on a beautiful young girl, whereupon Ben took cards in the game.

Outraged by the Texan's interference, the Frenchman challenged him to a duel. He refused to shoot it out with six-guns at ten paces as Ben suggested, however, and insisted on swords. They finally compromised by going into a pitch-dark room together, armed with knives. It was the Frenchman's last duel. Thompson was forced to flee for his life, a murder charge against his name.

On another occasion a young Englishman was gambling in a house run by the killer. The Britisher decided he was being cheated.

"You're not dealing honestly!" he blurted, face white with anger.

Silence rolled through the room like a thunderclap. Such an accusation, on the frontier, meant death, either for the man making it or the dealer. And Ben was dealing!

"You can't say that here!" snapped the gunman, his pistol focussed on the Britisher's stomach. "Take it back while you've still got a chance!"

Panic-stricken though he was, the other showed his backbone.

"Go ahead, damn you, shoot!" he cried. "I still say you're cheating!"

To the amazement of everyone in the house, Ben didn't let the hammer fall. Instead, he burst out with a roar of laughter.

"You've got nerve, kid, even if you lack sense," he declared. "Just get out of here while you can still walk."

But all too often the Texan's moods were bad instead of good. As he grew older, he drank even more than in his youth. Even his post as marshal of Austin didn't calm him down. Full of liquor, he shot up the town night after night. Sooner or later, it became obvious, the famous Thompson luck would give out.

The prelude to the collapse was played in San Antonio one night in 1882. The gunman had been bucking the faro layout at that city's Vaudeville Theatre, an establishment run by one of his friends, Jack Harris. At the end of the evening, Thompson walked out without settling for his losses. He claimed, by way of excuse, that the game was crooked.

Harris backed his dealer to the hilt, and said so. He also asserted in no uncertain terms that, in his estimation, Ben Thompson was just the same as any other welsher.

WORD of this reached Austin's marshal. Returning to San Antonio, he killed Harris in a

gun-fight, later resigning as marshal. A jury acquitted him and he went back to the capitol.

Then, March 11, 1884, the final act was played in the killer's riotous life. He ran into King Fisher, a gunman just as tough as he was, who at the moment was serving as a Uvalde County deputy sheriff. Fisher suggested that they go to San Antonio for an evening's entertainment. Ben agreed.

The pair saw East Lynne at a local theatre, then dropped in at—of all places—Jack Harris's Vaudeville Theatre. The place was now under the management of Billy Sims, an old enemy of Thompson's. Joe Foster, the man whom Ben had accused of running a crooked game, was still dealing for the house.

As Fisher and Thompson sat in their box, Ben saw Foster. He ordered the gambler to have a drink with him. Foster replied that all he wanted from the man who had killed his friend, Jack Harris, was to be let alone. He refused to drink Thompson's whiskey or to shake his hand.

With a bellow of rage Ben rammed the muzzle of one of his guns into Foster's mouth. Fisher and a policeman, Coy, tried to restrain him.

Then, suddenly, Colts were roaring. When silence fell, Thompson and King Fisher lay dead upon the floor, while Foster—wounded in the leg and doomed to die—was staggering downstairs.

But though the verdict of the coroner's jury declared that the two master killers had themselves been killed, justifiably, by Coy and Foster, the old timers have it that they were the victims of an ambush—that riflemen, posted in boxes higher up, fired down upon them to avenge Jack Harris' death. And the fact that eight slugs tore through Ben's body tends to support the claim.

Be that as it may, Ben Thompson was dead, the Thompson luck run out. As murderous a killer as ever hailed from Texas, he died as he had lived—battling to the death, with the thunder of gunfire for a funeral march.

THE END

RINGO: TOMBSTONE TERROR

★ By CLARK SOUTH ★

A PERT dance-hall girl slid in between two of the crowd of men who lined the bar in the tawdry saloon out Arizona way.

"How's about buyin' me a drink, mister?" she cajoled, smiling up at the bull-necked cattleman at her right. The big fellow stared down at her out of piggish, close-set eyes.

"T'hell with yuh!" he snarled thickly, his voice fogged with liquor. "Git away fr' me, yuh slut!" His ham-like hand lashed out in a shove, sent her careening against the wall at the far end of the bar.

"Suh!"

The shover turned, bullet head thrust forward aggressively, thumbs hooked on the twin gun belts that x'd across his thick midriff. His pig eyes narrowed as he surveyed the man who faced him.

The stranger was tall, lean, erect. Thin lips slashed a grim line across his tanned face. Dark, deep-set eyes glowed dangerously. Long, tapering fingers hung close beside low-slung, ivory-gripped Colts.

"Suh," he repeated, "I suggest that you apologize to the young lady." His voice was low and well-modulated. Perfect diction marked every syllable, standing out strangely in this frontier saloon where good grammar was an accident.

The hulking man at the bar shifted his feet apart. "She's a lousy dance-hall slut," he growled. "I said it, an' it still goes. What yuh goin' t'do about it?"

The other's handsome face darkened with anger. "Regardless of the young lady's occupation, she remains a woman and, as such, deserves respect," he pointed out with quiet, deadly earnestness. "You will therefore apologize, suh, or I shall kill you. I promise it!"

The cowman let out a bellow of contemptuous rage. His big fists streaked toward his holstered six-guns. As one man, the crowd of spectators dived for cover.

His hands slapped on the hoglegs too late. The big, ivory-gripped equalizers of his opponent were already in the clear and roaring a Colt-roll of death. A surprised expression twisted the face of the bull-necked man for a moment. Then his knees buckled and he slid to the barroom floor, dead.

The lean stranger blew the smoke from the barrels of his guns, and slipped them back into their holsters. Turning, he bowed in courtly fashion to the wide-eyed girl who was the cause of it all, and stalked calmly out of the saloon.

That was John Ringo, outlaw and killer: A man who would not let any woman—no matter what her status—be insulted in his presence, and who never broke his word.

Perhaps he was born handy with the six-shooters. Certainly his background fitted in with the idea, for a list of his relatives includes the Younger brothers, famous Missouri outlaws who fought under Quantrill during the days of the Civil War and later turned to bank robbery with the James Boys.

John began his bloody career in Texas. He was still a boy when his only brother was dry-gulched in the course of a feud between cowmen and sheepmen. The death of his brother was the call to arms for young Ringo. Grimly he hunted down the three men who had done the killing and, one by one, shot them down.

But even in those days Texas law did not look on murder with favor. His thirst for vengeance slaked, John had to hit the owlhoot trail. For years he drifted from one wild camp to another, picking up a living as a gambler and gunman.

Then came Tombstone, wildest of all, Arizona's biggest boom town. A center for both miners and cattlemen, shootings were so frequent that the town's leading paper was named the Tombstone *Epitaph!* Ringo apparently liked the looks of things, for he promptly settled down as a leading member of a gang of rustlers and outlaws headed by the notorious "Curly Bill" Brocius.

Such palmy days were doomed, however. Wyatt Earp, one of the west's truly great gunmen, was imported to clean up Tombstone. Six-shooters on his hips and United States marshal's star on his vest, he went about the job with the efficient deadliness that everywhere marked his career. Following him from Kansas came his brothers, Morgan, Virgil, Warren, and James; and his closest friend, "Doc" Holliday, ex-dentist, gambler, and cold-nerved killer.

PEACE descended on the community in short order. Although beneath the surface a storm was brewing between the big rustlers and their friends and the Earps, what amounted to an armed truce was temporarily in effect. The small fry among the outlaws looked over the brothers and Holliday, and decided that Tombstone was a fine place in which to be law-abiding. The marshal and his men were as much feared in Arizona as they had been in Dodge City and the other towns they had policed.

Feared, that is, by all but one man: John Ringo. Others might talk big about what they'd do to the Earps, but when the time came to put up or shut up, they hunted their holes in haste. Not Ringo. His favorite drinking place was the Earp-managed Oriental Saloon. When he met Wyatt or any of the rest of the Kansas killers on the street, be they alone or together, he looked them in the eyes and insisted on his half of the sidewalk.

At last it became obvious that Tombstone wasn't big enough for both the marshal and the outlaws. Instead of waiting for the blow-off, Ringo decided to handle things his own way. Wyatt, Morgan, and Virgil Earp, and Doc Holliday, were lounging in front of an Allen Street saloon, swapping talk with Charlie Thomas, the mayor. Across the road stood Tom and Frank McLowery; Ike, Finn, and Billy Clanton—all leaders of the anti-Earp faction; and John Ringo.

Dark and debonair and deadly as ever, the outlaw left his friends and crossed over. He grinned coldly at Wyatt.

"There's got to be a show-down, marshal," he declared. "Unless this trouble is settled—and soon— there'll be war between your side and mine. Blood—innocent blood, maybe—will be spilled."

"Well?"

Again the chill grin flashed across Ringo's handsome face. His dark, gleaming eyes probed Earp's like twin rapiers. "We're both wearing guns, aren't we, Wyatt?" he said softly, tauntingly. "We can settle it all between us: We'll step out into the street, then draw and shoot at ten paces. And may the best man win!"

The marshal's jaw dropped. Then he shook his head. "I'm a peace officer, Ringo, not a hoodlum. Besides, I'm runnin' for sheriff. A gunfight like you talk about would be fine advertisin', wouldn't it?" Turning away without more ado, Earp walked into the saloon, followed by his brothers.

Across the street, his enemies stared at one another in blank amazement. Wyatt Earp, reputed to be the most deadly gunman alive, apparently had felt that taking on John Ringo was a little bit too big an order.

Now the outlaw turned to Doc Holliday, smiling icily. "How about you, Doc?" he queried. "You're not in politics, and they say you've never turned down a fight."

"That's right," retorted Holliday, grinning wickedly, "an' I don't aim to start now."

Ringo flipped the corner of his handkerchief toward the ex-dentist. "Grab it," he instructed, "and we'll shoot it out without letting go."

Holliday's left hand shot out to catch the proffered corner. A strange man, Holliday, even in a country where strange men abounded. His gaunt frame was racked by tuberculosis. Perhaps it was the knowledge that the disease would get him sooner or later that made him so reckless. At any rate, he was counted as a dangerous man, equally proficient with knife or six-gun or rifle. His favorite weapon, however, was a sawed-off shotgun. When the Doc expected trouble, he strapped it to his shoulder and marched forth to battle laughing. To all outward appearances he had not a nerve in his body.

Now he snatched for the handkerchief. Every spectator knew it would be a fight to the death. Wyatt Earp might back down, but Doc Holliday? Never!

But before Doc's fingers could hook into the cloth, Mayor Thomas sprang between the two gun-fighters. "For God's sake, quit it, you two lunatics," he begged. "Tombstone's seen too much blood as it is, without you adding to it."

Regretfully, the Doc and Ringo agreed to a temporary truce. The latter was still hopefully standing by, however, in hopes he might get an Earp, when Deputy Billy Breckenridge stopped by to tell him he was wanted by the sheriff.

"Sorry, Ringo," Sheriff John Behan told him when he appeared at the jail, "but we can't have

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A THOUSAND HEAD NORTH

(Continued from page 65)

finally said. "As long as it means a fight, I suppose you were right. If we hadn't started it, they would have. And if they think we're going to raid *them* tonight, then they might stay cleanhome and not raid us. You going back?"

"I'm going back to town after I clean Ace's gun. I need some more cartridges."

"Better keep out of town!" King snapped. "You know they're laying for you."

Bates rolled a cigarette and seated himself on a bedroll. "I know," he said. "But if I can slip in to Charley Atlee's stable, he can go down and get the shells for me at the store. Nobody'll suspect anything."

HE GOT up and went over to the pile of warbags on the ground, hauled out the one with Ace's name painted on it, and fumbled around inside. He came back with a jointed cleaning rod, oil, and patches. King sat and smoked thoughtfully while Bates worked on the 45-90.

"Must have been quite a little shindig," the foreman finally commented.

"Huh?" said Bates, looking up. "Oh, over at Kennifer's. I hit one gent. Not sure whether it was permanent. They tried the old hat trick. When that didn't work Kennifer talked to me from one window with the girl as protection while one of his hands tried with a rifle from the other window. Only *my* hat was on a stick too. Twenty feet away."

He took off the punctured headgear and eyed the hole in the crown, put it back on again.

"I'm worried about Lin Davis," Buck King finally said.

Bates was pushing an oiled patch through the dirty bore. "Davis? Who's he?"

"Kennifer's foreman. A tramp rider stopped by this morning. Some fellow working the summer ranges around here. Said this Davis is lightning on wheels with a short gun. Two gunmen, in fact. Only one around here who packs a brace."

"So?"

"They're out to get you, Red. Kelly's a killer and bad. You might have a chance against him. I thought I could put him down last night by the time he got me. But if what that rider said is true, Davis will be gunning for you and you wouldn't have a chance."

"In that case," Red Bates answered softly, "I won't give him one, Buck. I'll steer clear of trouble with him. I know him, if he's the only man around here who packs two Colts. We'll just have to wait and see what happens. Meantime, if you could spare a couple of the boys, maybe Ace and Pug, and let 'em come over to Kennifer's tonight in case something goes wrong with me, it'll kind of keep this Lin Davis gent and his men on their toes. Sort of off balance, you might say."

"I'll think it over," King said, tossing away the butt. "Might be a good idea. If we've got to fight, we'd better do it before we get that herd into town. I'd sure hate to mix it up with a thousand head of wild steers crowding into the loading pens. And three gets you five that if they don't hit us before we get into town, they'll do it then."

Bates rose and went back with the cleaning rod and oil. He returned, this time with the belt for cartridges he'd forgotten the night before. It had been annoying to carry all that weight of loaded shells in his pockets and saddle bags. He filled the loops, slung them over his shoulder, and got to his feet again.

"Well, I'm going to browse the brush west of Porterville and keep an eye on the road to Kennifer's ranch until dark. I'll also watch out for Mutton Chop's wagon coming back. If he don't show up, I'd suggest sticking by the herd. They might have arrested him as bait for you and the boys to come in town after him and Shorty. That would leave the herd wide open for a raid that would scatter them for forty miles."

"We're not leaving the herd," King growled. "Come hell or high water, we're sticking with this herd. We'll stay here if we have to eat straight fresh killed beef and nothing else for the next week."

Bates nodded and went to the horse, a black one this time. It was a night horse, both in training and in color. He swung his lead weighted body into the saddle. "All right," he said. "I'll stick to the brush until such times as I think it's safe to come in. I'll keep on harrying them as much as possible. I'll try to get back tonight to set a small grass fire. The grass is dry enough in some spots to burn a little. Enough to start Kennifer's cattle."

"Don't start them this way! If they ever busted loose in this direction, it would give Kennifer the chance he wants to ride out and meet us. It would be easy to fight it out over disputed cattle and give him a legitimate excuse for wiping us out. We've got to play our cards right, or we'll go under. But," and Buck King's jaw set in a hard, stubborn line, "I'll put them thousand head of critters aboard cars in Porterville if we have to fight every man in the country."

"Just Kennifer's crowd. The rest of the country will keep a strictly hands off attitude, maybe waiting to see how we come out. So in case I don't get back, let Ace and Pug go over and give the boys a second round. So-long."

HE TOOK the trail to Porterville and after watering the black, rode up past the sinks. He was none too soon. He'd hardly got under cover of the mesquites when a group of horsemen emerged from a draw, headed directly for the camp where King was alone. Bates let go a muttered oath and swung off to one side, letting them pass. He put a hand over the horse's muzzle and listened, catching brief glimpses of them as they passed not too far away.

The man in the lead was big and fat, crotchety, and garrulous. With him was another man. Both wore stars on their shirt fronts. Bates didn't know it then but that very day the sheriff from the county seat, accompanied by one of his deputies, had paid an unexpected visit to Porterville. They'd left the day before, camped that night, and thus divided up the long ride, arriving during the day. With the two lawmen were Tad Brown, Mike Kelly and Gabe Summers.

They dropped down the trail at the north end of the sinks, the same trail that Bates had but minutes before come up, and rode toward where the foreman still sat by the dead fire at camp. Red Bates swung down and went forward on foot.

He knew what they wanted now; or at least he could guess. They were after him for information as to the location of Ed Harmon's body, and most likely with a warrant sworn out by Tad

Brown. Bates stood there on the bluff, screened by the mesquites, until the party rode up. He saw, gestulating on the part of the sheriff, what appeared to be clipped replies from King, and angry waving of hands on the part of Tad Brown. Presently King mounted his horse and rode back with them.

Bates turned and slipped into the underbrush. He led the black for two hundred yards into a thick mesquite clump, tied him securely as a solid prevention against the temptation to crop a bit of grass and thus wander into view, and sprinted awkwardly toward the spot where Ed Harmon's body lay buried. He came out on the bank above and looked down. It was still there, undisturbed as he had left it. The puncher moved up a ways, found proper concealment, and removed the heavy shoulder cartridge belt for comfort. He lay down with the heavy 45-90 repeater beside him and waited.

The wait wasn't long. After a time the sound of their coming rang out on the gravel covered bottom of the arroyo and the party approached. The hidden watcher got his first look at the sheriff. He was bulbous nosed, red faced, and decidedly unpleasant looking. In contrast, the deputy was young, lean, efficient looking.

King obviously was blazing with anger as they came up and stopped. He was lashing Tad Brown with cold fury.

"So you arrested them, did you, you boot licking law dog?" he gritted at Brown. "On Kennifer's orders. On a trumped up charge that Mutton Chop quarrelled with a man. I suppose Shorty shot somebody without a gun. Goddam!"

"I arrested them and they'll stay there," Brown answered testily, his courage at peak now that he was apparently backed by more men packing badges. "I'll get that Bates too."

"You won't get Bates. As for Mutton Chop and Shorty, if you think I'm going to leave this herd and go in town, falling into a trap laid by Rome Kennifer, you're thinking wrong, and you can tell Kennifer so. I'm staying with this herd."

"Kennifer got back to town a little while ago, just as we got ready to leave," commented the sheriff. "From what I hear he might have good reason for making trouble after what happened over at his place today. Looks like I'll have to stick around a few days and haul in that young feller."

"You've hauled in enough for one day, I think," snapped the foreman, his eyes blazing. "Two of my men, are now arresting Charley Atlee on a trumped up charge that he murdered the man lying there."

"Where?" demanded the sheriff.

"Right in front of your damned nose! Bates showed me the spot last night on the way in. There's Ed Harmon's body under that cut bank—shot in the back by some man with a rifle. The best brand inspector this state ever had. All right, there he is. Now do what you'd like. I'm going back to my outfit and I don't want any man trying to stop me."

He turned without another word and loped back the way he had come.

The men dismounted. From where he lay on the curving lip of the gully not forty feet away Red Bates could see it all. One of the men—Kelly—took down a spade from his saddle and began to scrape away. The partly decomposed body came into view and all of them instinctively backed away from the odor. The sheriff took out a handkerchief and blew his bulbous nose with a loud honk. He readjusted it to cover both mouth and nose, went over and bent down for a closer look.

"It's Harmon, all right," he said,

straightened and backing away, handkerchief returning to its pocket. "I knew Ed well. I don't know who did this, boys, but it's bad. Ed was a state man."

"I know who did it," growled Tad Brown. "Atlee, of course. I found all of Harmon's belongings in his house when me and Mike searched it this morning. Atlee was even fool enough to keep the horse around in his stable. Ed had two, and maybe he just turned that one loose after he shot him. Or sold it."

"Nemme mind," said the sheriff, puffing up into the saddle again. "We'll see what comes up at his trial. Looks like an open and shut case. Good work, Tad. Well, cover him up again, Mike, and let's get back to town. I'll have to have a wooden box made and hauled out here to put him in. We'll bury him in town. Hurry it up, boys, and let's get back. I want a drink. Looks like I'll be sticking around for a few days."

CHAPTER XVI

RED BATES lay there for a few minutes after their departure, anger growing in him as it had grown in King. Charley Atlee had been neatly framed on a murder charge that would put the actual killer safely into the clear. Whether the fake letter from Harmon in Mud Flats had been meant to lull suspicion about the disappearance of a man never expected to be found, or whether it had been all a part of a well laid plot, Bates didn't know.

But one thing was certain: If that letter from Mud Flats ever appeared in court as evidence, and was proved *not* to be Harmon's handwriting—then Charley Atlee was doomed. It would convince a jury of any twelve men that Atlee himself had caused it to be sent, then murdered the brand inspector. Bates thought of Mary Ann again and got up. He lifted the heavy cartridge belt across his shoulders and went back to the black horse.

He cut a course almost due east of the sinks, holding to the thick mesquite forest. Less than a half mile from town he could find enough cover to hide him until dark and, at the same time, keep an eye on the road leading out to Kennifer's ranch. He was curious to know if any of them were coming into town.

He came to the road at last and worked cautiously across it, edging into the greenness again and working north until he found the right cover. It lay in a small cut from whose cover he could watch the entire south end of Porterville as well as the road nearby. He tied the roan out of sight and took the last of the cold biscuits and cold beef Mutton Chop had fixed up the night before and munched away, following with a cigarette. An hour passed and the sun swung over half way toward the horizon. Bates smoked more cigarettes, comfortably propped up against the bank with his arms behind his head, hat low over his eyes. He felt sleepy.

He was about to doze off when the sound of a horse's trotting hoofs came from the road, around the turn. Somebody was coming from the Kennifer ranch. The Circle K man snapped upright, drowsiness forgotten, and picked up the big repeater. He saw the rider, and then he saw the guns.

The man was Lin Davis.

Davis and the others had remained in the bunkhouse for more than an hour after Alma Pritchard had taken her departure. Several tries had been made to draw fire, all without success. Finally one of the more venturesome had edged his way outside and made a dash for the corral. Nothing happened. Another followed. Within minutes Kennifer, astride his horse, was leaving final orders for his men and loping out across

the dirt dam toward Porterville.

Davis had gone into the bunkhouse again, where two men were working away with leather to fashion a new hinge for the door. He shaved, put on a clean pair of levis and shirt, and followed at a more leisurely pace. He was within a mile or less of town when suddenly he jerked upright and his hands flashed down to his thighs.

"Don't do it, friend," Red Bates said from below, looking over the sights of the 45-90. "It just ain't healthy. Just swing that horse around and put your back to me."

"That kind, eh?" Lin Davis said softly.

"Not unless you make me do it. I only want those guns and I want you to pull 'em one at a time and drop them. Slow."

"I keep my guns," Davis answered tonelessly.

"They arrested Charley Atlee in town today for the murder of Ed Harmon. I was kind of enjoying myself up until then. I ain't anymore. You can turn your back and do as I say or you can get shot out of the saddle. I'm in a killing mood, Davis. Kennifer's gone too far. I dropped one of his men last night by accident and Tad Brown dropped another when I ducked. You're number three. Or if you want to try a draw against a cocked repeater lining your chest at ten feet. Go right ahead, it'll all be the same."

DAVIS looked down from the horse into the eyes that somehow, at this moment, didn't seem to go with the man who had apparently been enjoying himself during the siege of the bunkhouse that noon. These eyes were hard—and just a little bitter. The gunman knew eyes. He had looked into many of them. He judged men by what he saw in their eyes.

He reined the horse around with his back to the man on the ground, slowly lifted one pistol and let it thud to the grass, followed by a second. He reined around once more.

"It won't do you any good," he said in his gentle voice. "I can get another pair."

"I know it," Bates said. "But guns are funny. No two pair balance the same, or have the same trigger pull, especially new ones. Strange guns throw a man off. I think you're after me. I think Rome Kennifer has ordered you to put me out of the way. So I've been waiting here, hoping you'd come along. I'm giving myself that much of a break."

"You'll need it, friend. Now what's the next move?"

Red Bates shrugged. "Suit yourself, Davis. You can go to town after a new pair of guns and send the law pounding down this way—where I won't be, of course—or you can go back to the ranch to wait more of a hospitable visit tonight."

"I'll go back to the ranch, friend. I've another pair of guns there . . . that I'm also used to. We'll meet again."

"I suppose so," Bates half shrugged. "I'll be seeing you again, friend."

He rode away, back down the road whence he came, this time at a lope. Bates stood there with the cocked repeater in his hands, watching him go, noting the swing of the man's overly wide, square shoulders. He knew the man as Lin Davis had known him. Davis had been born with what few men possessed; a coordination of hands faster than his eyes. Most men looked and then acted. Davis's hands acted instinctively, in times of violent action, ahead of his mind.

Red Bates, standing there, knew that in an even break Davis would kill him

before he got his gun clear of leather. Bates was pretty handy with a six shooter. Faster than the average man. But against this man he was doomed before he started.

And it was coming. Lin Davis would never rest until the two of them shot it out to a finish.

He shrugged and went back to his position. The sun finally went down and darkness set in. Bates mounted the black, swung further west of town, and came in by the same darkened wagon yard he'd passed the night before on his way from the depot.

The town appeared quiet. Down the streets a ways, about three hundred yards, lights from the Blue Bird threw a dim yellow glow out on the porch. Across from it were the lights of a store, still open. Red Bates cogitated, then took a chance. He circled through the night, came up back of the store, and swung down in the black alley. He pushed in the rear door cautiously and breathed a sigh of relief as his eyes saw no more customers within. The proprietor, a crisp looking lean man with grey hair, was counting cash in the till, preparatory to closing up.

He looked up as the apparition, looking like a walking arsenal with the big Winchester and shoulder belt, stepped quietly inside and closed the door.

"What—" he began, startled, both recognition and fear showing in his eyes at the same time.

"Easy," Bates grinned. "This ain't a stickup. I just want to buy some more cartridges."

THE man relaxed and then his face broke into a smile. "One moment, friend," he said, and went to the front door, which already was locked. He blew out the lamp on a bracket beside it and threw the store's interior into enough gloom from the one small remaining lamp that figures within couldn't be seen plainly. He shoved the lamp in behind a group of bridles hanging on a rack and reduced the glow some more.

"So you're this Bates?" he smiled. "I'm glad to meet you, Bates. You're with a friend."

"Thanks," the Circle K man said. "But I'm surprised."

"Possibly. But I'm a businessman. There are still a few others of us here in town who figure that if Kennifer takes over everything here it will hold business volume down to about half of what it would be if this was an open shipping point. If Kennifer gets away with what he's said publicly—as he did last night—trail herds will shy away from Porterville in the future. We'll lose tens upon thousands in business. You and your outfit are trying to stop that. Now what can I do for you?"

"You can give me some forty-five ninety shells. About a hundred and fifty rounds and—"

"Ah!" chuckled the storeman delightedly. "Now I begin to understand! Friend, there's a lot of talk buzzing in town tonight. There are a few people laughing—when Kennifer or any of his men are not around. You get the shells, and if they're to be used for what I think, they're on the house."

He went to a shelf in the rear where long rows of cartridges of almost every caliber from .32's to .405's lay in bright colored boxes and brought down a number stamped 45-90. "Here's two hundred rounds on the house. Anything else?"

"Some forty-fives, I reckon. About a box."

"One box. More if you want them. What else? Anything I can get you in the way of food?"

"Nope," Bates said, and then paused, speculatively. He suddenly grinned.

"Got any crayons or colored chalk?"

"Chalk?" blankly.

"I like to draw pictures while shooting at Kennifer's bunk house. Helps to pass the time."

The proprietor laughed softly and got the crayons.

"Just one," Bates explained, opening the box and selecting a green one. "I draw awfully small pictures," he added.

"I don't know what you're up to," chuckled the other. "But I'll bet a double eagle that it's going to be good. What else can I do for you, Bates?"

Bates had put the crayon in his shirt pocket. He glanced at the boxes of shells on the counter and then at the man. His eyes had taken on that lazy coldness again.

"You can," he said softly, "tell me about Charley Atlee. I was hid in the brush a few hours ago when the sheriff and deputy and Kelly, Tad Brown, and Gabe Summers came out to make Buck King show them where Harmon was buried, me not being in sight at the moment. I heard 'em talking about Atlee being arrested for Harmon's murder. What about it?"

"Charley didn't do it—if that's what you mean."

"I know that. Charley's my friend. How'd it happen?"

The other man shrugged. "It just happened," he said. "The sheriff rode in this morning rather unexpectedly, and within a half hour they had Charley over in the jail. By the way, your outfit's cook and one of your riders are in there with him. They came in this morning, loaded up the chuckwagon from this store, and then started out. As they got out on the front porch Tad Brown and Mike Kelly came up. They threw guns on the both of them. Tad took your two men down to the jail. Mike Kelly got in the wagon and drove it up to his livery. I suppose," he added, smiling sardonically, "that you'll have to pay the usual fee to get it out."

BATES pick up the cartridges, but had his arms full, along with the rifle. The storeman took part of the load and went out with them to the horse, where they put the cartridges into the saddle bags, evenly dividing up the extra weight. Luckily, Bates had left his bedroll and grub sack in the hidden wash where he had made camp and slept the night before.

A thought struck Bates. He was remembering the telegram that Pritchard had written out the night before. He asked a question.

The storeman nodded. "Confirmation came by wire about noon today. Poke McGee, our new operator at the depot, brought it over, cussing and rumbling like a dried up range bull. Gabe Summers got the appointment. He's Porterville's new brand inspector for the state."

"I see," Bates said softly. "And if he wanted to find something wrong with any of the brands we're driving—four of them in the herd—he could hold us up. Thanks."

He swung up, looked down through the darkness, took the outstretched hand. "I won't forget, mister. And now if you'll just tell me where that jail is and then sit quiet and listen for awhile—"

"I'll listen. The jail is at the west end of town, not more than a hundred yards from the town horse trough. A low flat building not any bigger'n a shack. It's about two hundred yards from Mike Kelly's livery stable. You can't miss it. And I think I'll close up and go across to Kennifer's—just to see what happens when the ruckus breaks. Good luck, Circle K, and if you ever need any more cartridges Joe Brannon will furnish them . . . free."

Bates rode into the night again, working his way cautiously down back alleys. He had plenty of time, and he wanted to talk with Mary Ann. He tried to tell himself it was about Charley, but the memory of the girl's eyes were before him and he couldn't get over them. She was as pretty as Alma Pritchard, but there their meeting ground ended. Alma Pritchard came out of another world than that of a liveryman's daughter. She came out of almost the same kind of world as a man named . . . Homer Redfren Bates.

Bates thought of his father and suddenly grinned. He went to the depot.

It was deserted. He swung down and went inside. Poke McGee was at the operator's desk. He was reading a book, luridly illustrated, entitled, strangely enough, "Train Robbers In Kansas, or, The Outlaw's Son."

The reception this time was different. Poke got up and came over, eagerly shaking hands. He was cold sober.

"Hello, you young billy goat," he cackled. "How's business? I been hearing a lot of things today."

"So have I," Bates grinned. "I want to send a telegram."

"Sure," said Poke, reaching for a pad and pencil. "Anything you want, anywhere. Them cars'll be here tomorrow night. Forty-five of 'em. I had a few extras brought in on the order."

"Fine," Bates replied, without looking up. He was scribbling industriously. He wrote:

> Gabe Summers, appointed brand inspector here this morning, is a cheap cow thief and two bit cattle buyer working on a frameup with Rome Kennifer to control all cattle being shipped through Porterville. Ed Harmon has been murdered, Dad. Send me one hundred dollars poker money. I lost again. Red.

Poke took the message, stared at it for a moment, then let go a gasp. "Jehosaphat!" he almost shouted. "Bates. Lieutenant Governor. Then he's—"

"He's my old man," Red Bates grinned. "And that's between you and me, Poke."

He went out, leaving Poke staring incredulously after him, mouth open. He mounted the black again and rode a circle to come in from the west, quite unaware that another man named Frank Yarren, also armed with a 45-90, was slipping his horse westward into the mesquite toward Kennifer's ranch.

Bates rode on and pulled up in front of Atlee's corral, went inside with the animal, hid it in a stall, and headed for the door.

Again, as before, there was a light showing beneath it. Mary Ann he guessed.

CHAPTER XVII

MARY ANN ATLEE had spent an agitated day. She hadn't cried when the sheriff, his deputy, Tad Brown and Mike Kelly, came down and arrested her father. She had stood rigidly, fighting down cold fear as they handcuffed him and hustled him out of the office.

A tramp rider, working the summer ranges and now out of a job, had come by to ask for some feed credit for his horse. He was the same rider who had stopped and talked to King out at Gyp Sinks. She had hired him on the spot and then gone to see a local lawyer about bail. Her father had some money in the bank; about fifteen hundred dollars. She presumed that if more bail was necessary she could borrow on the livery.

But the trip down had been one of heart breaking disappointment. It was

sixty miles to the county seat with no communications other than horse or buggy. It would take at least two or three days to get over there to the judge and district attorney, have them set the amount of bail, and then return. The lawyer had promised to do everything he could. It wasn't enough. She was helpless.

She spent the day with the new hand, whom she knew, and then had given him money for supper. He was to return and take over, sleeping in the hay that night. She sat there in the office alone, saddened, thinking of her father over in jail with the cook and one of the riders from the Circle K. And she kept thinking of that red headed young cow puncher, Bates, with his easy grin and brash bearing. She had liked the frankness in his eyes, the calm manner he'd maintained out there in the street when he so thoroughly disgraced Tad Brown in front of the Blue Bird. She thought of Alma Pritchard in her big home and wondered why some people could be so free of trouble while others must fight against perfidy for the very right to live.

A bootstep sounded outside the door and she turned, thinking it was the new man back from supper. Then the door pushed open and she rose to her feet as Mike Kelly came in.

Kelly appeared to have been drinking. She saw it in his green flecked eyes, and she saw something else in them too; something that had been hidden to all but her. He looked at her and essayed what he thought was a friendly smile.

"Get out," she said quietly.

He moved over to the desk, which was between them. He wasn't drunk; she would have held less fear had he been weaving. He was steady on his feet. That was why the cold fear gripped her so much. She glanced toward the front door and he caught the glance.

"Your new hand's not around," he said, grinning at her. "I waited until I saw him head for supper. I want to talk to you."

"Get out, Kelly," she repeated quietly.

"Your father's in trouble, Mary Ann. And I come—"

"I knew he's in trouble, Kelly. And I know why you came. For the last time, get out of here before I call for help."

He grinned again at that one. "Go right ahead," he half sneered. "Won't do you any good. Nobody bucks Mike Kelly in this town. We're in the saddle here, Mary Ann. We're running this town and there ain't room for anybody else. You can play along with me or not."

"I'd rather touch a dog than stand within five feet of you," Mary Ann Atlee told him. She was fighting hard to hold her voice level; fighting for time until the rider she'd hired to work in the livery might return. Not that she felt he could be of much help. He was a long, bony rider of the shiftless variety, working just enough to keep him in spending money, but not good enough to hold down a regular job during anything but rush seasons when men were hard to get.

He moved around the desk toward her and she moved the other way, keeping it between them.

"Aw, I'm not going to hurt you, girl," he protested almost wheedlingly. "I just want to talk to you. Your father's in a bad spot. He'll hang in spite of everything. There's only one man can save him and that man is right here, Mike Kelly. I got influence, Mary Ann. Why, I could go to the sheriff right now, I bet you, and if Mike Kelly said so he'd release your paw without a dime of bail.

But—"

"For the last time, get out, Kelly! I won't ask you again. I'll call for help. I know why you're here. No man but a stupid one would have come on such an errand. And if you think I'd marry a murdering dog like you to save my father, then he'll hang. And you ought to know him well enough by now to know that he'd hang before letting me. Get out of this office and don't come back."

HIS liquor inflamed brain exploded in fires that had been consuming him for weeks everytime he saw her on the streets. Now a snarl broke from him and he went half across the desk and made a grab for her. The grasp caught her sleeve up by the shoulder and jerked a long tear in it, exposing one soft round breast. Then he was across with her, fighting as he wrestled her over against the wall, his breath reeking in her face. She gave one sharp cry and fought silently, helplessly, striking futily at his hard, now brutal face. The man had gone mad.

She cried out again and then from somewhere behind the door crashed open and a red headed cow puncher hit the room. He hit it with a roar of anger she'd never thought Bates could utter.

She caught a single glimpse of his flaming face as Kelly released her and whirled, and if ever she saw killing lust in a man's icy blue eyes they were reflected in those of Red Bates.

"You yellow dog!" she heard him hiss as the pistol came out. Kelly, in turning, had instinctively flashed his hand to his right hip. The gun came out, was blocked by Bates' left hand flashing out against it. The six shooter in his right hand swung hard against the side of Mike Kelly's head, sending his hat flying.

She backed up into a corner, covering her bare breast, and stood immobile while the kind of a scene she'd never dreamed of took place before her eyes. Bates was pistol whipping Kelly until the man was down on the floor, his face streaming blood from a dozen cuts, two front teeth knocked out, leaving bleeding gaps between lips beginning to puff horribly.

"Don't, Red, you're killing him!" she cried out at last and put a hand on his arm.

He straightened, panting, his eyes still blazing. He swallowed hard and wiped the sweat from his forehead. "The dirty yellow cur," he got out again.

He turned to her and the fire went out of his eyes. He sleeved his forehead again and sheathed the big six shooter. "You all right, Mary Ann?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Thank God you came in time . . . Red," she almost whispered. "He was mad. It must have been the liquor. No man in his right mind would have tried such a ghastly thing."

"I don't think he'll try it any more," he said.

She looked down at the bleeding, motionless man sprawled on the floor. A little shudder went through her. "I think you've killed him," she said slowly.

He shook his head. "I was careful not to. I've got use for him. Mary Ann, my horse is in one of the stalls. Do you think you could lead him out the back gate into the alley, like I came in, and then over to the jail?"

"Of course. What are you going to do?"

"Take Kelly over to get a chuck-wagon from his stable. Then I'm going to crash that tin can of a jail and get Charley and two of our men out of it."

She laid a hand on his arm again, and the touch did things to him that the

touch of quite a number of other women hadn't done. She looked up at him out of those clear eyes and again he got the funny feeling in his midriff.

"They'll kill you," she whispered.

"Maybe. They haven't yet. Where's the water pail?"

She pointed it out in a corner. He picked it up, walked back, and began dribbling the contents into Kelly's bloody face. When the man stirred Bates dumped the rest of it in a splash.

Kelly struggled to a sitting position, putting an exploring hand to his face. He wasn't exactly a pretty sight, but the liquor had been shocked out of his brain. He spat blood from the area where the two teeth had been. Under one eye was a mouse the side of a ripe blue plum. A half dozen minor gashes showed red around his eyebrows and his lips, now swelling to twice normal size, were blue beneath the blood.

"Get up," Bates snapped, lining the muzzle of a six shooter in his face. "I was shooting skunks today. Tonight I'm shooting cur dogs at the slightest excuse. You and me are going for a walk."

HE WENT out into the stable with the sullen man slouching ahead of him and the girl following. They walked up the alley, cut across the dim west end of the main street, and came to Kelly's livery. A handyman looked up as they went inside, then sat rigidly, not speaking.

"You've got a chuckwagon in the yard with four Circle K horses in the corral," Bates ordered. "You and Kelly are going to harness up and hook them to that wagon. Then the three of us are going for a nice little ride. Where depends upon you two. Either to hell or with me. Make up your mind."

The man obeyed with alacrity. "Horses are in the stalls," he said, and picked up a lantern.

While Bates held the lantern and a six shooter Kelly and his man harnessed up the four chuckwagon horses, drove them out, backed them up, and hooked the trace chains. Then with his two unarmed prisoners Bates drove over to the jail by a roundabout way. He kept glancing uneasily in the direction of towns, but so far there had been nothing. Kennifer either didn't expect anything or he had other plans of his own. Bates hoped that about now Pug and Ace were very busy on Kennifer's spread four miles to the south and west.

He wheeled the wagon around expertly and then backed it up against the back wall of the jail by a window, grinning at Mutton Chop, Shorty, and Charley Atlee. "Hello, boys. You've got visitors." And to Kelly and his man. "Sit tight. Here," he said to Mutton Chop, removing two pistols from his shirt front and passing them through the bars. "Keep these polecats covered until I get them chains lashed around the bars. We've got to work fast. Where's the chains, Mutton Chop."

"In the tool box under the rear wheels," the cook gloated. "And, Reddie, all bets are squared. From now on you can have all the cake you want without stealing it from me, you blasted grub rustler!"

"Where'd you get the guns?" Shorty asked.

"Borrowed 'em off a gent named Lin Davis this afternoon."

"Mmm,' came softly from Charley Atlee.

Atlee had said nothing while Bates worked, passing the long chains around the bars. The chains had been brought along to lash the wheels while working the wagon down through gullies where there was no road. And Bates was glad that Mary Ann had wisely kept out of sight. Kelly might come back and take

revenge upon her.

Bates saw the man's shrewd eyes watching Kelly's face, and again he thanked God that Mary Ann wasn't there. If Charley knew what had happened in his livery this night he'd grab the gun from Mutton Chop's big hand and empty six shots into Mike Kelly's body.

And the same thoughts apparently seemed to be running through the killer's brain. He sat woodenly, and there was shifty fear in his mein. He kept glancing at Atlee and then back to Bates, now getting back up in the wagon after tying the end of the chain around the rear axle.

"What happened to Kelly?" Charley finally asked. . . . very quietly.

"Him?" Bates grinned cheerfully. "He got drunk and tried to kiss a horse. Only he tried to kiss the wrong end. The horse didn't like it and kicked him in the face."

"You're a cheerful liar but I like the sight of it," Charley Atlee grinned.

Bates got into the driver's seat, undid the lines and eased off the brake. He edged the team forward until the chain tightened. "All set?" he called softly.

"Let'er go," grinned Mutton Chop, scrambling back from the thick adobe wall.

The bars had been set deep, four feet down and above. The four horse team, feeling the strain, leaned into the traces and apprehension shot through Bates at the thought of an axle breaking or the chain giving way.

Neither did. There came a slight crunching sound—and then a five-foot section of the entire wall gave way with a crash that tore off the back end of the chuckbox and left it in splinters. But the men were free.

That crash had sounded like an explosion of dynamite. Mutton Chop and Shorty came scrambling out and made a dive for the axle to get the chains loose. Bates jumped to the ground and motioned for his prisoners to descend.

"That's all for tonight. Thanks for giving us a hand," he said. "You little boys can run along now back to Kennifer's leash."

They lost no time in obeying; and hardly had they disappeared around the corner of the now thoroughly wrecked building when Mike Kelly's yell of warning went through the night. He shouted again and again, still running.

"All right, boys," Bates snapped to Mutton Chop and Shorty, already climbing up. "Get that thing rolling and don't stop laying on leather until you're back at the herd."

"Where you going?" Mutton Chop demanded suspiciously.

"More business. Tell Buck I'll be in later." He turned to Charley Atlee. The liveryman still stood in the opening. He was calmly smoking his pipe, leaning against the shattered edge of the wall.

"What the hell!" Bates muttered, looking a question.

Charley smiled and shook his head. "Thanks, Red, but I'll be staying."

"Staying?" demanded the puncher incredulously.

A nod. "Running would just strengthen the case against me. It would leave Mary Ann here alone in town too. She's got to be looked after. Then, too, I think it'll be kind of funny for me to stay in a jail with most of one wall missing. Unless I miss my guess the sheriff is going to be a very unhappy man with me in here, until he takes me over to the county jail on his return home. Better get going, Red. I hear somebody hollering and running."

THAT was true. Bates ducked to the corner, saw a familiar figure running toward the jail. Mutton Chop saw

it too. He let out a roar, dived over into the chuckwagon and came up with the muzzle loader. Then he jumped to the ground and ran toward Tad Brown.

Brown saw him coming and, at about fifty yards, suddenly wheeled. "Don't shoot!" he shrieked. "Don't hit me with them buckshot, mister!" and he wheeled about for a sprint in the other direction.

Bates saw the gun go up. Its roar sounded like a cannon. Tad Brown let out a scream and clapped both hands to the seat of his pants as the beans and bacon rind blistered him. The gun roared a second time, this time from the choke barrel. That one bunched them in a smaller area—and Mutton Chop's aim was good. A second yell of pain rent the night as the running marshal, both hands still clapped to the seat of his now thoroughly blistered behind, fled. He wouldn't be able to sit down for a week.

He passed the town horse trough, did a cut over that would have put a cutting horse to shame, sat down in the trough and pumped himself up and down vigorously in its cool waters.

Mutton Chop blew smoke past the muzzle of the gun and turned. "I allus knew," he said, grimly, striding toward the wagon, "that one day I'd git me a varmint with that load."

He climbed up and Shorty lashed the team out onto the prairie in a run. Bates turned to Atlee, still smoking but now grinning. "So-long, Charley," he called. "See you later."

He ran down through the night to where the outlines of his horse stood dim and came up to the girl.

"Goodbye, Red," she said softly, handing him the reins. "Take good care of yourself."

"I will. Oh, I forgot something. Force of habit." And before she realized what was happening he had her in his arms and was kissing her like he'd never kissed a woman before. Then he was up in leather and cutting another wide circle away from thirty or forty men who were running down the street, past where Tad Brown was getting drippingly and cursingly out of the trough, toward the jail where Atlee still stood and smoked.

The area around the Blue Bird was completely deserted. That made it easy for Bates to slide in the back door of the house where Brown would be for a change of clothes within a matter of minutes.

Queenie wasn't home, but there was a light on in both kitchen and bedroom. The place was spic and span, which meant that Queenie and her battling spouse had made up again. Bates was certain it wouldn't have been so spick and span otherwise. He went into the bedroom, rumpled up the covers, pounded both pillows into crumpled heaps, and placed them very close together. The crayon came out of his pocket. He wrote on the wall above the bed, in green, RED WAS HERE, and went out to mount his horse.

"Nothing like a good fight now and then to keep love blooming," he grinned to the night rushing past his ears unconsciously echoing Kennifer's words of that morning.

CHAPTER XVIII

ROME KENNIFER had eaten his usual early supper about sundown that evening, going next door to the cafe run by Queenie and her spouse. She brought in the sizzling steak, looking pretty in a buxom sort of way, all except for the discolored eye. This she had covered up with powder. The effect wasn't exactly natural but it helped. She wore the same new blue dress as of the evening before. He set

to work on the steak, his mind working.

He had met Alma Pritchard on the street an hour earlier and though she had greeted him and even stopped to talk for a moment, he knew that the events out at his ranch that day had left their mark deep. But Kennifer was a man who bided his time. Now that the sheriff was already in town, Atlee in jail, along with two of the Circle K men, things slowly but surely were getting back in order. He was bringing order out of what almost had been chaos.

The arresting of the two men undoubtedly would goad King into violent action, and then, at the moment Kennifer already had planned, there would be a wipeout. It would justify their actions against him and clear the way for the future.

As for Bates, Frank Yarren was over in his shack, oiling his 45-90 and waiting for darkness before slipping out of town. Davis had his orders too, and Kennifer was pretty certain that Bates would no longer cause any trouble. Let him go back to the ranch tonight and make trouble. Any shots he fired would only draw the deadly Winchester expert to his quarry, and should there be any slip-up, Lin Davis still could be depended upon to follow through.

Kennifer, despite his meeting and casual conversation with Alma Pritchard, ate with gusto. He thought he knew the girl. She still liked her men strong and he was a strong man. She had reminded him of the party tomorrow night and said she would expect him to dance with her. Politeness on the part of a genteel lady, perhaps; but it showed interest, and that was all Kennifer was interested in at the moment.

Queenie came back with the coffee. They were alone in the place.

"How're things going?" she asked. "This place has been a beehive of talk today."

"I expect," he replied, dipping sugar. He used one spoonful, stirring. "But they're going all right. Seen your friend Bates lately?" he grinned.

She grinned back at him. "Tad was sure mad, wasn't he? Serves him right for being so jealous. All he expects me to do is get up in the morning at six, cook in here all day long over a hot stove, close up at dark, and then go sit twiddling my thumbs until he comes home—which might be anywhere from midnight on. He sleeps as late as he likes but never thinks I might like a little pleasure once in awhile."

"Tad's a busy man," he said, and reached for the catsup.

"That's just too bad about him," she flared. "I'm glad Bates did what he did. Tad was getting too important. And if he don't watch his step, one of these days he'll get up some morning and I won't be here. I like a little fun once in awhile."

She leaned down over the counter, nestling her arms over ample breasts. "He'll probably be away tonight, busy around town, Rome. I'm going over to visit—"

"That's out," he cut in. "We're friends from now on, nothing more. Besides, you've made up with Tad again. He said so today."

"Yes, I've made up with Tad. Everything's all hunky-dory again. But you ain't foolin' me, Mister Rome Kennifer. It's that Pritchard woman. I seen you talkin' to her and watchin' her every time she comes down town. You think she'd marry a plain saloonkeeper? Hah!"

HE GAVE her a cold, silent gaze and went on eating. She grew wheedling again. "But I don't think you ought to be so cold to me just because you're crazy about her—oh, there you

go getting mad again," she pouted prettily. "All right, there's a new hardware drummer been eating in here for two days. I can find myself a friend to keep me from getting lonesome."

He finished the meal and went out, a little disgusted with her. But there was no doubt about it; Queenie was a lusty wench.

He went next door to the Blue Bird. The night bartender was on duty and busy with taper, lighting the new lamps. The place had been scrubbed out clean by a new swamper and, back of the bar, a new mirror threw back the room's reflection.

Darkness came down in full. Poke McGee strolled in, over from the depot to pick up a couple of quick ones before the evening train came in. Kennifer strolled over.

"Hello, Poke. How's the new job?"

"All right," Poke said, picking up his drink. He downed it and poured another. He downed that one too.

"Keeping you busy?"

"Plenty. Them Circle K cars'll be in tomorrow night hooked on ahead of the coaches. 'Bout forty-five of 'em. They can start loadin' first thing Saturday morning."

"Glad to hear it," Kennifer replied pleasantly.

"Yah," Poke said. "I'll *bet* you are!"

He downed a fourth and then a fifth, passing a dollar across the bar. The bartender put it away. Poke wiped his lips with his sleeve and rubbed his bald head. "Well, I got to be goin'. Nothing like good liquor to make a man feel like workin'."

"Didn't know you were a five-drink man," Kennifer said, reaching for the bottle and pouring. "You're a good customer in here, Poke. Have one on the house."

Poke looked at the drink, then eyed Kennifer suspiciously. He looked at the drink again.

"Are you tryin' to get on the good side of me so's I'll be another Tolson, or are you gettin' soft hearted all of a sudden?" he demanded bluntly.

Kennifer smiled tolerantly, looking down at the other from his glinting black eyes. "You're the most suspicious cuss I ever saw," he smiled. "If I wanted you to work for me, I'd come out and make you an offer. Take the drink."

Poke took it. He took four more from Kennifer. He mopped his bald head again. He was beginning to sweat from interior heat. "Well," he said at last, placing a steadying hand on the bar, "I got to be goin'."

"Why? Train won't be in for another hour or more yet."

"Maybe some telegrams to send. Been sending some today. To big people."

"Who, for instance?"

"I ain't sayin'."

"One more on the house and then you can go," Kennifer smiled, pouring. "Come on, Poke. Who sent those telegrams to big people today?"

Poke looked at the drink, then at Kennifer. He rocked back on his heels. "You can," he hiccoughed, "go straight to hell," he said and made a weaving walk to the front doors.

He passed the sheriff coming in, toothpick in mouth, trailed by the lean, silent young deputy. The sheriff—his name was Arden—turned for a look. "That common here in town?" he wheezed.

KENNIFER smiled and shook his head. "Poke's all right, Tom. Fine little fellow. Never makes any trouble. Come on and have an after supper sherry, then I'm going to take you into the back room and beat the pants off you in a penny ante game."

A few more customers were begin-

ning to fill up the place. Tad Brown entered and came back. By the time they got settled around the table George Pritchard himself paused in the open doorway of the back room.

Kennifer hurriedly got to his feet. "Come in, George," he invited heartily. "You're just in time for some penny ante."

"Ah!" the big man said delightedly. "Glad to oblige. Glad to. Just the thing to take a man's mind off business and such."

They made room for him and the game got under way, with only the deputy not sitting in. He stood motionless against the wall, eyes intermittently flicking from the cards to the outer room and the men at the bar.

"How's things going at the plant?" Kennifer asked, shuffling.

"Pretty good. Pretty good. We're going to make a trial run Monday, I think. That new canning machinery is nothing short of miraculous. Amazing things, what modern engineers can do today."

"How is Miss Pritchard?" Kennifer asked—and then could have bitten his tongue for the slip.

Pritchard glanced at his cards and looked over, his eyes twinkling. "A little tired, I think, after what must have been an exciting day. Or shouldn't I discuss it here?"

"Why not?" Kennifer asked smoothly. "This is the sheriff here—" they shook hands across the table—"and you might be able to throw some interesting sidelights on a matter he's very much interested in."

"Yep," grunted Arden. "Got to haul in that young feller Bates about tomorrow. I don't mind any couple of men shooting it out now and then if they've got a right to quarrel and the winner can say it's self defense. But when they start raiding honest ranchers and filling the place full of bullet holes—with an innocent young woman getting her life endangered—then it's time for the law to step in."

The twinkle deepened in Pritchard's eyes as he put out a white chip, worth a penny. "Well, I'd hate to throw any deep water on that end of it—that is, from the law's end—but as far as my daughter is concerned, I rather think she enjoyed it. As a matter of fact, I believe she carried on quite a conversation with him during a lull in the—er—battle. After which he gallantly allowed her to leave and then escorted her part way home. And then, gentlemen," he chuckled, "perhaps I shouldn't add this in public, but that red headed young man actually kissed her goodbye when he left."

The sheriff leaned back in his chair and tittered, looking at Kennifer. What he saw in the man's eyes as Kennifer lowered his face to his cards stopped the titter most abruptly. Sudden raging fires of jealousy flared through Rome Kennifer. He controlled himself with an effort.

Once or twice during the ride out to the ranch he had been tempted to reach over and hold her hand, but the courage to do such a thing hadn't quite been within him. And the thought that Bates had got up from his place of concealment, left them huddled in the bunkhouse for an hour because they thought he was still out there, and then blandly ridden in a ways and kissed her goodbye almost turned Kennifer livid with anger.

But he could wait. He had waited fifteen years for Porterville to grow. He could wait now—until in the morning. Yarren was out there with his rifle and Lin Davis had his orders.

KENNIFER threw in his hand and watched the others get the bets up

to fifteen cents. Pritchard raked in the pot and Arden picked up the deck for the deal. Kennifer put in a penny white chip and leaned back.

The game was still in progress some forty minutes later, with Pritchard about two dollars winner, when the trouble broke. From a point some three hundred yards up at the west end of the street there came the sound of a muffled thud carrying faintly through the walls. Tad Brown looked up, shooting a questioning glance at the sheriff.

"What was that?" he demanded.

"Danged if I know."

"Sounded like it came from up near Kelly's livery," Kennifer put in. "By the way, where is Mike tonight? He's usually here about this time."

"Said he had some business to attend to," Brown said, pushing to his feet. "I got a' idea though," he grinned wolfishly, "what that business is, now that we got Charley Atlee locked up in jail."

The lean young deputy had glided out on the front porch. He beckoned and Brown broke into a run. "Trouble up the street, I think. Want me to go along?" asked the deputy. "Lot of people running."

"Stay here," blustered the marshal. "I can run this town. You boys are visiting. I can handle anything that comes up."

He broke into a run up the street. Pritchard and the others came out. They started too. In a matter of minutes the Blue Bird was deserted. All except for Kennifer. He stood outside, looking up that way. And Brown had hardly disappeared when Queenie came coyly by on the arm of a man in a hard shell derby, dark coat and checkered pants, shoes freshly shined. The "odor" of perfume came from the both of them. This looked like a date.

Queenie nodded to Kennifer an I-told - you - I - could - find - me - another-friend nod and the saloonman smiled pleasantly. "How's the hardware business?" he inquired pleasantly.

"Very good, thank you," the man said, tipping his hat in deference to the lady and, at the same time, throwing Rome Kennifer a startled look. They disappeared between the two buildings to Queenie's house across the alley.

Then came the boom of a shotgun, followed by a yell of pain from a voice that was unmistakeable. The boom and another yell followed. Out in the night a four horse team took off at a run and that told Kennifer all he wanted to know. He leaned there lazily, watching the running figures with the sheriff puffing along far to the rear.

Five minutes later Tad Brown came striding down the boardwalk, his britches dripping water at every step. He was stepping almost daintily and wincing at every step. He saw Kennifer too late to duck out of the way, put on a bold face and came by without hesitation.

"Where've you been?" Rome Kennifer asked pleasantly.

"Fishing," snarled the marshal angrily, his mustache quivering. He disappeared between the two buildings after some dry clothes, and almost immediately his voice came in a roar. They were at it again.

Kennifer stepped to the edge of the porch and then half recoiled as a figure shot by. The man carried a derby hat in one hand and his coat in the other. Behind him came Tad Brown, still in wet pants, brandishing a fireplace poker. The two running figures disappeared across the street and were lost in the darkness and Kennifer strolled back to his original position beside the doorway.

"Love," he murmured. "It must be wonderful."

CHAPTER XIX

FIVE minutes later Tad Brown came striding back, still carrying the poker. It was slightly bent now, in the middle. There must have been a struggle for his wet pants now were all covered with mud.

"I got one good lick in at him anyhow," he said grimly, "just as I lost my footing and fell. If I hadn't, there wouldn't a been any poker left. Doggone it, Rome, I cain't let that woman out of my sight. I come home all soaked and there they was in the kitchen kissin' each other like a couple of love birds. So I ran in the front room and got the poker and went after him. I shoulda shot him right there but he wasn't packin' no gun."

"Maybe," Kennifer suggested, "she's been hearing reports about you making a few trips down in the lower end of town 'business.' Now what are you going to do—get into another brawl with her?"

"No," said the marshall fiercely. "I'm goin' to give her just one more chance to be a true and lovin' wife. Just *one more!* I'm goin' over and change my clothes in the bedroom and—"

"By the way, just how did you get wet?"

"Nemme mind, nemme mind," growled the marshal and strode into the darkness between the Blue Bird and the cafe.

Some impulse caused Kennifer to follow. He didn't know why. Possibly because he had heard so many of their brawls and hadn't witnessed one. He couldn't believe they'd make up. He saw the marshal's muddy rear disappear into the kitchen door and followed to the window. Queenie stood belligerently, a big crystal glass water pitcher in one hand.

"You just start something!" she cried out, lifting it. "You just say one word after all I know about you."

He hurriedly put down the poker. "All right, all right," he growled at her. "Maybe I was a little mad and I had reason to be. But if you'll promise me you won't ever look at any other men—"

"I was just walking with him, honey," she said coyly, coming forward. "Why, I've been sitting here ever since I closed the restaurant, except when I went out for a little fresh air and that nice Mr. Simpson came along. He's a good customer in the cafe and I didn't think it would do any harm to be nice to him. Now you go in the bedroom and change your clothes. I've got it all spic and span for you."

"All right," he said, somewhat mollified, and strode through.

Kennifer was about to turn away in disappointment when a sound that was an explosive gasp came from the bedroom. It was followed by a roar of rage. "Queenie! Queenie! Come in here!" Tad Brown bellowed. "All alone, was you? I'll—I'll—" She went in and the fight was on.

Ten minutes later Rome Kennifer, weak from laughter, went back into the Blue Bird. He hadn't laughed so much in months, and certainly, during the past twenty-four hours, he had had little reason for anything but gloom.

A line of grinning men stood at the bar, ears cocked. Kennifer strolled by. "It was a beauty," he grinned. "Set 'em up on the house, Ike."

He went back to the back room and sat down, after closing the door. Presently footsteps sounded and the sheriff came puffing in, tailed by the quiet young deputy, and Mike Kelly.

Kennifer said, "Good God! What happened to you?"

"I'll take care of it myself," grunted Kelly through puffed lips and sat down.

"Send out for a bottle, Rome."

"I need one bad myself," Arden wheezed, blowing his bulbous nose. "Rome, this thing is getting hot."

KENNIFER listened in silence while the sheriff related all that had happened. He said nothing when the bartender came in with bottle and glasses. He poured for the others.

"What about Atlee?" the owner of the Blue Bird finally asked.

"That's one thing I'm worried about," complained the sheriff. "He won't leave."

"He won't *what?*"

"He won't leave. When we got up there he was standing right in the opening where they jerked the wall down with that chuckwagon; just stood there puffing on his pipe and looking right through you and not saying a word."

He hurriedly gulped his drink and poured himself a second. He drank that one and then put down the glass, wiping his lips with his palm. He looked at Kennifer.

"I told him that I reckoned as how under the circumstances he could go on home but not to leave town until I could take him over to the county seat. But do you know what? All that little dried up rooster did was stand there and grin at me. 'Oh, no, I wouldn't think of it, Sheriff,' he says. 'I'm a prisoner on a murder charge and not entitled to go free. But I don't like the dinner and supper Tad Brown served me. Not enough meat in the stew,' he complains. 'So I'm going to stay right here and have Tad bring my meals to me, and if they ain't on time I'm going to put in a complaint to the county commissioners.' Damn it, Rome, this business is getting serious. It's bad enough with this fuss between you and this Circle K outfit. I could stay up in the county seat and kind of turn a deaf ear. But this murder of Ed Harmon is different. I don't know who did it or why—"

"What do you mean, you don't know who did it?" snapped Kennifer coldly. "You've got the man who did it and the evidence to convict him."

"All right, if you say so. I sure hope so anyhow. If it ain't put through, there's liable to be something hot around here right pronto in the way of Texas Rangers. Don't forget that Ed was a state man."

"I'm not forgetting. You go on out in the morning with your wooden box and take care of his remains. Bury him here and then take Atlee on up to the county seat and stay there. We'll take care of the rest of it."

The sheriff mopped his balding head with the handkerchief, transferred it to his nose and blew, and then refilled his glass. Against the wall the young deputy, in answer to Kennifer's nod toward a glass, shook his head.

A knock came on the door. At Kennifer's come in Gabe Summers entered. He glanced meaningly at Kennifer. "Man to see you outside."

"Who?"

"Lin Davis. Just got in from the ranch."

"Tell him to come on in. He can talk in here."

Davis came in. He paused in the doorway, his emotionless eyes flicking to the silent young deputy, the faces at the table. His hands hung low at the handles of two white handled guns.

"Sit down, Lin," Kennifer said, nodding toward the chair which had been occupied by Pritchard in the poker game.

"I'll stand," came the gentle reply.

"What's up?"

"Talk here?"

"Sure. Go ahead."

"I met Bates this afternoon while

coming in town to see if he might be around. Stepped out of the underbrush with a 45-90 and got the drop on me."

"Hmm. So that's why you're wearing the other set of guns?"

"He had 'em in his shirt when he backed the chuckwagon up to the jail," Kelly put in. "Gave one to the cook and the other to that other puncher from the Circle K. They used 'em to cover us while he log chained the bars and jerked 'em loose." He spoke thickly because of his swollen lips and missing front teeth.

"Anything else?" Kennifer asked his foreman.

"Plenty. They hit us tonight. Two punchers I think. Set a small grass fire. Burned off about an acre of dry grass. Enough to set the herd off. They're scattered from hell to breakfast."

HE WAITED but Kennifer took it calmly. Kennifer said, "That's all right, Lin. The boys have been getting lazy anyhow. They can round them up tomorrow. No hurry."

Another man might have displayed astonishment, but not Lin Davis. He nodded and went on. "There was some shooting off to one side. Somebody I couldn't place. I think he got one of the Circle K punchers. Who was it?"

"Yarren. I sent him out to look around and keep an eye on things. Thought he might slip in to the ranch, but I guess he laid out in the brush. So he got one?"

The short nod. "I left four of the boys at the ranch to watch out for Bates in case he comes back. I've got eight men outside of town, waiting. We've got plenty of cartridges," he added.

But Kennifer shook his head. "I'm playing my cards, Lin. We'll let things ride for a bit. They're not asleep out there. Ten to one every man of them is out in the brush around Gyp Sinks with a Winchester. You might ride right up on top of one and lose two or three good men for nothing. Go on back to the ranch with the boys. Start combing the brush tomorrow and drive everything back in the valley. But you might slick down your hair and put on a new shirt for tomorrow night and come in to the Pritchard house warming."

"Yea?"

"The rest of the boys will stay at the ranch and not be present to scare him off. I'm playing a hunch."

Davis had rolled a cigarette. He looked at it as he licked and then struck a match on the butt of a six shooter. He puffed, dropped the match, and looked with those dead eyes over the glowing tip.

"A hunch," he said, and went out without another word.

The sheriff stirred uneasily. He looked at Kennifer. "So you think Bates will show up tomorrow night at the Pritchard's? And what'll I do about that jail break?"

"I know him," Kennifer replied. "Nobody else but him would. Nobody but a man like Bates. He'll show. Do nothing about the break, either. It's one more excuse."

"It's bad business. Bad business," murmured the sheriff. "I don't like it, Rome. People are liable to rear up if the deal gets too raw."

"Let them rear. You'll be in next election, same as usual. Just get out of town with Atlee before the thing breaks."

Mike Kelly sat sipping his drink. He twisted in his chair and grunted in pain. "If Yarren doesn't get Bates, my money is on Lin. But I warn you, Rome, and I warn Davis too. That man Bates is hell on wheels when he gets going."

"So," Kennifer murmured gently, "I notice, Mike. So I notice. If it isn't inquiring too much in your love life,

would you mind telling me how he did it? You're no slouch with a gun."

"I could beat him in an even break. I will, if Lin doesn't get him tomorrow night. But he fooled me the slickest you ever saw. When I turned from the gi—uh—"

"From the girl. Go on, Mike," prompted Kelly, half maliciously. "When you turned from the girl, which means you were with her in Charley Atlee's office, then what?"

"I went for my gun. That's where he fooled me. He blocked my right hand with his *left* hand and jerked his own gun and whacked me over the head with it. That's where I got this."

"Hmm. Thanks for telling me, Mike. Blocks a right hand draw, eh? But I wonder what would happen if Lin threw a *left hand* gun, which he can do as fast as his right. Why, yes—thanks very much, Mr. Kelly. And now I think you'd better go down and let the doc put some leaches on that mouse under your eye. It's hell of a looking sight."

"I'll be going too," the sheriff said, pushing himself upright. "Better get back to the hotel to bed. That box for Ed won't be finished until tomorrow afternoon. Carpenter has to do a special air tight job on account of the condition of the body. See you boys tomorrow."

He left and the deputy glided after him. Summers stirred. "How about me riding out tomorrow and checking them brand papers King is carrying, Rome?" he suggested. "I can hold up that herd for at least a week on those Victoriano Yabarra critters from across the border, on some pretext or another."

Kennifer looked at him out of his black eyes and smiled. "Yesterday that might have been a good idea, Gabe," he said softly. "Today it isn't. I don't want that herd touched."

He got up and went out, leaving the new brand inspector staring after him. Presently Summers shook his head and followed.

CHAPTER XX

AS for Red Bates, he hit out of town at a fast lope, looking back over his shoulder in the night. Now and then he pulled the big black to a halt to let him blow and to listen for sounds of pursuit. He presumed that by now the sheriff was organizing a posse and getting ready to head for Gyp Sinks. When no signs of riders behind developed Bates stretched the horse out a bit more and, after a time caught up with the chuckwagon, just as it descended the steep slope into the flat land near the sinks.

"Don't shoot!" he yelled at Mutton Chop. "It's me—Red!"

Mutton Chop shoved the Lin Davis gun back into his shirt, waved as the puncher closed in close by the wheelers, and they went down to camp. Shorty hauled the team around to put the wagon in its usual place and pulled to a stop. Bates swung down and went over to the fire. Only four men were present: King, Hank Watson, another rider called Pogie, and Ace Sampson. Sampson lay propped up against the saddle, shirt off, his shoulder covered with fresh bandages.

"What happened to you?" Bates demanded.

"I got hit," Ace said. "A little while ago. Just got in. And look what happened when Buck used my new white shirt for bandages. Ouch! Damn!" he grunted and swore again.

Shorty was unharnessing the team and Mutton Chop started tossing down sacks and boxes to Pogie, talking all the while. He told him of the arrest and of the break. Bates finished up the rest of the story.

"That's about the way it was, Buck," he added. "But I'm plenty worried. That little fracas out at the bunkhouse today should have sent 'em over here this afternoon, tonight at the latest. So far nothing has happened. Maybe they'll come later tonight, I dunno. But what I don't savvy is why that sheriff is sitting so low. By all the rules of the game he ought to be boiling out here to re-arrest Mutton Chop and Shorty for breaking jail, and, of course, with a warrant for me."

"Maybe he'll show up later tonight," King replied, adding more wood to the supper fire. "I don't know. We'll have to wait and see about them. It's you I'm worried about. I don't think they're out to arrest you."

"No?" softly.

"I think they're going to kill you."

"In that case," Bates replied, "I'll wait until Mutton Chop gets some grub ready and then light out toward the Kennifer spread again. Got a nice place to hideout in a kind of little cul-de-sac where a fire won't show. I'll go back there and sleep tonight and keep an eye on the outfit. But from what you boys just said, they're liable to be pretty busy tonight rounding up again. Where's Pug?"

"Out. He came in and slept this afternoon awhile—we're sleeping by turns day and night now to keep watching."

Bates sat down on a bedroll and lit a a cigarette. He was frankly puzzled. Kennifer had something up his sleeve. And, whatever it was, it boded nothing but bad for the outfit and the herd.

"Hear anything about the cars?" Ace asked.

"They'll be in about tomorrow night. Forty-five of them, I think."

King shifted and spat. "In that case," he said, "we'll make sure and then start loading early Saturday morning."

He said it casually, as though there was nothing to it but drive the herd in and get to work at the pens. He looked up at the sky. It was beginning to cloud a bit in the west. With the long drouth of that summer rain had been expected any week. This looked like it might be bad weather, with anything from a drizzle to a cloudburst.

MUTTON CHOP got busy with pots and pans over the fire. Presently Shorty returned after unharnessing and putting on hobbles. Out around them the herd was bedded down quietly. Through the darkness came the sound of a rider's voice, singing softly. Just one man with the whole herd. The others were on guard at vantage points King thought best to warn and fight off what might come.

Sonuvagun came in after a time and almost immediately left again to get another horse for Bates. He brought up the animal, saddled it for the puncher, and led the other away.

Presently Mutton Chop had a makeshift supper ready, mostly canned goods. He was using two goods boxes in lieu of the smashed chuck board. The men filed by and filled their plates, then headed over to hunker down and eat wolfishly. Few words were spoken. Mutton Chop carried a plate and steaming cup of coffee over to Ace and handed him a spoon. Bates went over and sat down beside the wounded man. Ace had mentioned only the bare details of the foray by Pug and himself.

"So you took up where I left off, eh?" Red Bates grinned at Sampson.

"We gave 'em hell, all right. Pug and me slipped around south of their place. We figgered they'd have men out all along the line, waiting for you to come back. So we came in from the south, got up fairly close to the ranch, and then

muffled our horses' hoofs with gunny sacks. We walked 'em right by within three hundred yards of the bunkhouse. When we found the right spot we took off the gunnies, got already to go, and then spilled some of Mutton Chop's kerosene on the ground and lit it. Right then things started happening! We hadn't even hit leather until about four gents opened up with Winchesters all around us, and for about two seconds we made good targets until we got out of the light of that fire. We hit straight north for a clump of mesquites with bullets buzzing all around. By that time the herd scattered around had begun to bawl and bunch a little. First thing you know they were off at a trot, then they hit into a lope and pretty soon they were pouring it on lickety-split west up the swale. About eight hundred head, I'd say. If they kept on going like they started they ought to be passing the Mescalero Apache Reservation over in New Mexico about now."

He broke off to laugh and then cursed the pain in his shoulder. He put down the spoon. "Guess I've lost my appetite," he admitted sheepishly. "I ain't hungry."

"When did you get hit?"

Ace lifted the tin cup of coffee and sipped at the scalding black liquid. He said, "Funny thing about that. We were clean away from there with nobody following when that shot came. We were cutting a wide circle toward Porterville —we were within a mile and a half of the place when I got it. Knocked me clean out of the saddle, even though it only grazed me enough to cut a furrow on my shoulder. Sounded like a 45-90 too."

"They probably sneaked up on you," Bates said and finished off the contents of his plate.

Buck King rose to his feet and put his plate in the water pan. "Hurry it up, Shorty," he grunted. "The boys have been without chuck since morning. Grab a horse and go out and relieve Cortez. He's due south of here about a mile, upon a bare hummock. Follow that first big wash you come to until you spot a giant cactus on the right hand bank. Go straight up the hill and call out. Take over for him and keep your eyes peeled. If anything breaks, fire three shots quick. Hey, have you got a gun?"

Shorty smiled a wizened smile and patted his shirt front. He didn't weigh a pound over one hundred and twenty-five but he was a top hand despite his forty-six years. He got up and went into the night toward the remuda corral, carrying his gear.

Pogie rose, a strapping big puncher in his early twenties. He stretched and then let go a satisfied grunt. "Whew! I shore et. Who'll I relieve, Buck?"

"Pug. He had a pretty rough day all day and then early tonight. If you see any of the other boys, tell 'em we'll bring 'em in for chuck as soon as possible."

"Want me to help out awhile tonight?" Bates asked from across the fire.

THE foreman shook his head, bending down for his saddle. "I want you to stay out of sight. Get back over in the brush. I'm going to saddle up and stay close in case the sheriff comes out. If he doesn't show up in another hour, I'll give the boys a hand on guard tonight."

Bates said so-long again and went to the dark bay horse and swung up. He rode south and west again and, after a time, found the cul-de-sac about three miles from the sinks. It had not been visited. He unsaddled, tied the horse close by on the end of his lariat, rolled

into his blankets and slept until dawn.

When he awoke there was a grey sky and drizzling rain.

He cooked himself a breakfast of bacon in a small frying pan and then fried cold biscuits in the grease. The coffee boiled over in its tin and he swore at the wet wood. Presently he finished with the last of the food, scoured the pan with sand, rolled himself a cigarette. The horse stood patiently, one hip slumped, back damp from the wet.

Bates carried his saddle over and got the animal ready for travel. It had managed to crop a bit during the night, but he wasn't too worried. He'd be back in camp sometime during the day, he hoped, to get a fresh horse. He wanted information as to whether or not the sheriff had put in appearance. Sounds would carry far in the darkness on a wet night, and he was certain that if there had been firing it would have carried the distance to where he was camped.

He swung aboard the bay and worked down the cul-de-sac for two hundred yards and then gigged up the bank, turning southward into the mesquites. Thankfully, they were everywhere around the east end of Kennifer's spread and crowded right up on the edge of the ranch buildings themselves.

That was what had made it so easy for him to lay siege to the when while they were at dinner. Cover had been perfect.

He rode for nearly a mile, working his way through among the trees, stopping now and then to listen, his eyes always to the west. He came out in an opening and, between the trees, surveyed the Kennifer buildings, a mile west of him. He saw no signs of activity, but cursed himself for not having borrowed King's binoculars. The valley, he noted with satisfaction, was almost empty. A few cows were visible at the far end, mere blurred dots and he guessed that perhaps the stock, used to the home range with its many water troughs from the wells, hadn't run too far and now instinctively were wandering back.

The cowman in him felt satisfaction at that. He knew what stampedes were. He had been in two of them on his father's big spread up near Austin. He had shot two critters with broken legs.

No cow puncher liked a stampede; and even if they were Rome Kennifer's stuff, Red Bates was glad they hadn't scattered too far. He only hoped just far enough that the man's dozen riders would be kept busy most of the day driving them back.

He reined over and rode again, edging further toward the open country. He was half out of the mesquites when the shot came. The distant crash of a heavy caliber rifle. He felt rather than heard the bullet drive into his horse's chest and the shock of its collapse. He kicked both feet free of the stirrups as the animal went down.

It fell kicking and a small red spot back of the shoulder showed that the wound was fatal.

He dropped ten feet behind it, away from the threshing hoofs; and then, with a grimace of pain, unsheathed his six shooter and put the animal out of its misery with a single shot through the head.

Then he lay there, close up beside it, cursing with savage oaths the man who had killed it. The killing of the horse had been deliberate, to put him at a disadvantage.

He looked up over its side and was just in time to see the rump of a horse being buck jumped into the protecting screen of mesquites a good four hundred yards away.

"Rifle expert, huh?" he muttered and reached up on top of his saddle.

Fortunately for him, the horse had fallen on its right side, leaving the 45-90 in its boot free for him to jerk clear. Bates yanked out the weapon, shifted the belt of cartridges to a more comfortable position on his shoulder, and glanced about him.

HE was in a bad spot. He was down afoot while the rifle expert out there had a horse. The man could ride circles around him and come in from any unexpected direction. Red Bates lay there for a moment, listening, his ears cocked while he planned a next move.

One advantage he had over the man who had killed his horse. The mesquites all about him were not brush but older trees with boles up to eight inches in thickness. Few limbs were three or four feet above the ground. A man lying flat could see the legs of a horse before the rider, up among the branches, could spot a prone man.

"All right, Mr. Expert," the Circle K puncher grunted. "We're going to play a little game of hide and go seek. I'm going to hide and go seek too, you horse shooting coyote!"

He wriggled away on his stomach eastward, cursing the wet grass and heading for the protection of a rain cut ditch forty yards away. He slid down into its wetness, the mud slick on his hands and chaps. For five minutes he lay there listening. An optimistic meadow lark tried out a few notes and Bates instinctively began working toward the sound. He knew that the bird would grow quiet and then take flight the moment sound came to its hearing.

For two hundred yards he followed the sound and then, suddenly, the bird was quiet. Bates flattened himself back of a thick cactus clump, careful not to get too close. There was a pack rat den around its bole and he knew the rats had a way of scattering dried cacti thorns about to discourage visitors in the form of skunk and hungry coyote.

The bird took wing and flew directly overhead, going in the direction whence Bates had come.

"So you're over there now, huh?" he muttered. "Circling around. Be kind of funny if you ran into one of the boys and got yourself plugged. And I hope you do. I don't like coyotes who'll kill a good horse."

He wet his lips and tried a few experimental notes. Then the clear notes of a meadow lark went wafting out on the damp morning air. He sent out the calls at regular intervals, still prone, his eyes scanning every foot of the area through a sea of mesquite boles. Presently movement caught his eyes and he saw his man.

He carried a rifle and was down on foot now, working his way forward toward the sound of the "lark." "Somebody else playing clever too," Bates grunted and shifted the big repeater. He cocked it and laid the hammer back flat. His nose began to tickle and he fought down the sneeze. It came with a loud "Ka-choo!"

He had never believed that any man could spin with a rifle and fire so fast. Both guns crashed out at the same time and Bates heard a yell as he rolled over further behind the cactus and spat out a mouth full of dirt. He wiped his lips and drove two more shots at the running, dodging figure; a figure limping slightly.

"Burned him," he said. "Damn this gun. I just can't get used to it. Wish I had my old 44-40. It's got a shorter range but I can put 'em where I want 'em."

He reloaded from the belt over his shoulder, and again pondered his next move. Off in the distance came the

sound of a horse's galloping hoofs and Bates started to rise—then dropped flat as the slug cut a cactus limb in two within inches of his face.

"Damn fool!" he growled at himself. "So you fell for that one, did you, Reddie? Just a wise little cow puncher who knows all the tricks, don't you?" Anyhow, we're both a foot now."

HE LISTENED to the sound of the galloping hoofs, which quickly became a trot and then stopped. The horse would not go far with reins dragging. Bates suddenly got up and, keeping as much cover as possible between himself and where he last had seen the man, sprinted away. No rider would get any further from his horse than necessary.

The thought of being set afoot in a strange country would cause any man instinctively to head for his horse. Bates ran until he was almost out of breath. He dropped flat to listen, watching for movement out there among the boles. There was none. Joy filled his soul as he finally saw the horse, cropping his way with reins dragging. He worked toward it, then fell into a mud wallow as the other man crept toward it.

They were within one hundred yards of each other and the horse when they saw each other, Red Bates with the 45-90 cocked and half way to his shoulder. The gun stock snapped up and recoiled with the crash. Frank Yarren spun around, tried to fire, and then staggered away.

Bates lined the sights, wary, suspicious. He knew the shocking power of a 45-90. It should have flattened the man like the blow of a sledge hammer. Yarren was walking around in wobbling circles; and now, as Bates half shifted his position, the man spun again like lightning as Red Bates shot again.

This one didn't miss. He had got the range and feel of Ace's big gun. He sat down, holding a light hand to the red welt alongside of his neck. It was burning like fire. "Damn!" he swore, half in anger and half in sheer relief. He hadn't realized until his nerves suddenly let go how taut they had been. He got up and went toward the sprawled body of the rifleman, a six shooter gripped in his right hand. He came up and stood looking down.

The horse had trotted away about one hundred yards and Bates went after it and brought it back. He swung down and bent over the dead man, a hand going into the rifleman's shirt pocket. He brought forth a soiled envelope and saw the name *Frank Yarren* written on it, with Porterville as the address.

Now he remembered. He had seen the fellow around town a couple of times when on his previous visit to Porterville Tad Brown had chased him out of town. Bates had not, however, connected him with any of the outfits, merely recalling him as a hanger on, one of a dozen, around Kennifer's saloon.

Hoofbeats came from off to the east, through the trees, and he swung the rifle up as a man rode through. The man saw the gun again and Bates saw the two guns again. One was as surprised as the other.

"So you've come over to look at the body, eh?" he jeered at the Kennifer foreman. "Well, take a look. There he is."

Still Davis said nothing. Another man might have been stunned that Frank Yarren, rifle expert that he was, should come out loser in a dry gulch game where anything counted. Davis merely sat there on his horse, staring down the barrel of the 45-90.

"I see," Bates said, "that you've got another pair. The rules ain't changed.

They're the same as yesterday."

Davis didn't nod, his queer, brittle eyes didn't change expression. He reined his horse around, dropped first one pistol and then the other to the wet grass.

Then without a word or a backward glance he rode straight away, toward the ranch two miles to the east.

CHAPTER XXI

BATES stood there and watched him go, puzzled in more ways than one. Davis was an enigma. A strange man with strange workings of the mind. And he had been born to kill. It was in his eyes, his set face, the swing of his square shoulders. An emotionless man who would not forget . . . or forgive. Regardless of any orders Rome Kennifer might have given him, this man would never sleep until the two of them had it out and Davis squared his account with the cow puncher who twice had got the drop on him and relieved him of his guns.

Red Bates shrugged and went over and picked up the pistols. He tied them and Frank Yarren's 45-90 repeater back of the cantle and mounted the dead man's horse, leaving the body where it lay. That was a job for the sheriff to do.

He rode through the mesquites and for hours kept wet vigil on the east end of the valley, where more and more cows were beginning to appear. Far in the distance he caught an occasional glimpse of a rider and knew they all probably were busy getting Kennifer's stuff rounded up.

An hour before sundown, ravenously hungry, he left his vantage point and rode back toward Gyp Sinks. He met no one on the way and this surprised him, sending the thought through that perhaps there had been trouble. But the herd was still grazing quietly and, to his surprise, most of the men were at the wagon when he rode up.

He left the horse and seven pairs of curious eyes watched as he came to the fire, flicking from the horse back to his muddy chaps.

"Things quiet?" he asked casually, seating himself on the wet tarp covering of a bedroll. His own was now back of the saddle too, along with the remains of his food. The horse was loaded down.

King said, "Yea," and looked at the horse again. "Kennifer's brand," he added.

Bates nodded and told them of what had happened. The welt on the side of his neck was now an angry red and paining all hell out of him. He's have to get some salve from Mutton Chop's first aid kit of remedies and fix it up a bit. He rubbed his now bewhiskered chin and rolled a cigarette.

"Sheriff ever show up?" he queried.

Buck King shook his head. "No," he growled, "and that's why I'm worried. I'm damned worried! Figure it out for yourselves, boys. Red goes over and shoots their bunkhouse to pieces. He takes away Lin Davis' guns—"

"Twice," snickered Ace Sampson from where he lay against his saddle, comfortable on his bedroll. "Brother," he murmured, "I'll bet that gent is as mad as a jackrabbit which come home and found a skunk in its bedroom."

A laugh went around the fire. There was some humor in it but not much. It was the laugh of men whose nerves were on edge, who had been waiting overly long, who were impatient for trouble to start and then get it over.

"He took Davis' guns away from him . . . twice," King went on. "Then the jail is busted open and two men taken out, and still that sheriff does nothing."

Pug Carson burst into loud laughter.

"I'd shore like to be in town right now just to watch that marshal I've heard about. That Atlee gal sent a rider out here today—he brought a telegram for you, Red, that the agent sent over to the livery—and he was dyin' a-laughin'. Says Atlee is sittin' up there all comfortable in that busted open 'dobie they call a jail with Tad Brown bringing his meals to him and cussin' like a mule skinner. Everybody in town is whooping over that marshal mincin' up the street with his rear end blistered from Mutton Chop's beans and bacon rind, carryin' a tray of food for the 'prisoner.' He says the sheriff is wild. They went up and tried to make Atlee go home but all he'd do, this feller said, was grin and smoke his pipe and complain about the food. Sheriff even went up and tried to arrest him or threatened to or something, but Atlee only says as how he's already been arrested and two won't hurt. Haw-haw-haw!"

A ROAR of laughter went around the fire at Pug's way of telling it. It *was* funny. Bates, grinning with them, mentally doffed his hat to the game little livery man, knowing now the wisdom of Charley's actions. Browbeating and cowing the public was one thing; being held up to ridicule was another.

Mutton Chop brought over the yellow envelope. Bates read it, a soft smile playing over his face, tucked it into his pocket without comment.

"Who's it from?" demanded Mutton Chop.

"A girl, of course," was the bland reply. "But then you wouldn't know anything about such things, being such a homely cuss that no woman would ever look at you anyhow, cookie."

Mutton Chop glared, let go a bull snort, and went back to his steaming pots.

"I just don't get it," King went on. He rose to his feet and began pacing the ground back and forth in impatient strides. "McGee, the agent, also sent out word that the cars would be in tonight for sure, with an engine ready at the pens in the morning to start spotting for us. So far Kennifer hasn't made a move. But he's not going to let those cattle get through, just as I told him they *are*—what's the answer, boys."

Bates stirred and threw away the butt, flicking it into the fire. "Today," he said, "is Friday. Tonight is the big party at Pritchard's. House warming for the new home they built. They're going to dance inside and probably fill the lawn. Everybody who don't know Pritchard ain't exactly a Good Samaritan will be there. The question now is: what about Kennifer's riders? Where'll *they* be tonight?"

"At the shindig," Pug said promptly. "That's a' easy one."

King was still pacing. Now he stopped as Bates shook his head. "You forget the girl. Alma Pritchard. She was at the ranch with Kennifer when I busted up the place. His men were in that bunkhouse handling guns. It probably didn't make a very favorable impression on the girl, from Kennifer's point of view. I'm guessing—mind you, I'm only guessing!—that Kennifer will be there with all his finery on, playing up to Alma Pritchard and trying to make a good impression on her father. And it wouldn't look any too good for him to be sided by about a dozen gun packing men, any of whom might get too much whiskey and raise a ruckus. I'm guessing them boys will be right in the bunkhouse, or with the herd, tonight."

"What are you driving at, Red?" demanded the foreman.

"It means no fight tonight, Buck," Red Bates answered softly. "It means

the fight will come tomorrow morning when we hit town, out in the open, with a herd on our hands. We're in for it!"

"By God, Red's right!" Ace exclaimed, bolting upright and unmindful of the pain in his creased shoulder. "He's right as rain! Sure, I see it now. He didn't dare hit this camp, knowing we were on guard and might lose him some men. He's been playing the waiting game. Otherwise, how the devil could we have got by with all we have against him without Kennifer making a single move to stop us. Last night he could have come out here with that boot-licking sheriff and raised all hell. He don't *want* that sheriff out here! That's it, boys, sure as shootin'!"

"Red's right, I think," put in the mild voice of Shorty from his position on his saddle. Shorty seldom talked much. The wizened little man usually kept to himself, and to this day nobody in the outfit knew his real name. Shorty kept in a hidden world of his own and talked little, but when he did men listened.

He went on, "When Red busted out one side of that jail with the chuck-wagon, there were plenty of saddled horses that the sheriff coulda jumped on and come after us. He could have caught us half way out here and shot us to pieces. Nothing happened. That's the answer, men."

King looked at him appraisingly, then resumed his pacing. Finally he turned, stopped again. "Hmm," he said thoughtfully, half to himself. "The cars will be there, everybody in town will be at Pritchard's, and—*if* we guess right—Kennifer's punchers will be on the ranch. It might be done."

"What?" put in Bates curiously.

"A night drive. Yessir, By God! *A night drive to Porterville!*"

PUG CARSON slammed a big fist into his palm with a hard, spatting sound. He almost let out a whoop. "Buck's got it! We can do it. Swing 'em in south in a circle and then right up to the loading pens. Boys, we can do it."

"Grub's ready," announced Mutton Chop, lugubriously.

They ate mostly in silence, as hungry men do. The sky had, with a final hard shower about sundown, cleared and there was prospects of a late moon.

"I figure it this way," King said, finishing with his plate and rising. "If we can let 'em bed down until about two in the morning and then ease 'em up in the light of the moon, we can make it. They'll bawl a little at first until they get awake. But after we get 'em woke up I believe they'll drive, since they'll be fresh and it'll be cool. They'll think we're just staring a little earlier than usual."

"I don't know how I'm going to use a Winchester with this bum left shoulder," Ace put in, "But, Reddie, I want my gun back."

"You can have it. I got a better one of the same caliber, all rigged up with fancy sights."

He had showed Buck the letter taken from Yarren's pocket. On it was copied in crude writing the four brands. They had both been puzzled, not knowing that Kennifer wanted, and had gotten, information as to ownership so that, in case he decided to make a rustling raid, he'd know to whom the brands originally belonged. He had figured on the appointment of Gabe Summers as inspector, after a suitable lapse following Ed Harmon's death, and knew he could use that information to tie up the herd, had it been necessary.

It hadn't been necessary. Events had shaped themselves differently.

Bates put his plate and knife and fork into the water pan and then got his shaving outfit. With hot water from

the big kettle, he laboriously scraped away a three day growth of whiskers, wincing when the razor came close to the red welt cut by Yarren's bullet on his neck. He salved it and then, after putting away his razor, brought out a clean shirt.

"I'm wet clean through," he grunted to nobody in particular, transferring the telegram to the new shirt's pocket, along with tobacco sack, papers, and matches. "I'm going to put on some clean clothes—"

He broke off, his hand still in the warbag. He fumbled frantically, then wheeled. "Where's my new pants?" he almost howled. "Some polecat has borrowed my new pants!"

He swung on Pug Carson, suddenly. Pug lay comfortably propped up on his bunk, his stomach well filled, a cigarette glowing. He was the picture of ease and contentment. He still wore his chaps and cartridge belt, but underneath them Bates caught the crisp gleam of new corduroys.

"Bad rain this afternoon," he said. "I got all wet."

"Whaaaat!!!! Why, you—"

"Best pair of pants I ever wore," murmured Pug airily. "Fit me like a glove. You ought to go buy yourself a pair sometime, Reddie."

Bates, his answer unprintable, stalked disgustedly toward the other side of the wagon to strip down and change the lower half of the underwear he wore to prevent saddle chafe. He changed, put back on the wet pants, and Mutton Chop came around.

"Hey, look, Red," he said delightedly, holding up a holster with a shoulder harness. "Been packing this thing around in my warbag for months, aiming to get myself a gun. Now I don't have to. I kin use the one you took off that feller Lin Davis."

"Hmm," Bates said, and took the outfit, with its special swivel holster. He began putting it on.

"What—" began Mutton Chop angrily, but Bates stuck a finger to his lips. "Not a word, Mutton Chop. Not a word."

"What's up?"

"Keep your mouth buttoned up. Buck don't know it, but I'm taking in the party at the Pritchard's tonight."

CHAPTER XXII

IN TOWN that night Rome Kennifer went home just before dusk, changed into his best clothes, and shaved himself. His black whiskers grew fast and he wanted to look his best. He liked the color of his jowls when freshly shaved. The blue made him different from other men; it gave him a sense of his own personal power. Tonight, he thought, he would let Alma Pritchard know exactly how he felt. She liked men of direct action and he was one. He would let her father know too.

Lin Davis had ridden in earlier in the day to buy himself a pair of new guns. Kennifer had raged at the news that Yarren, best man in the country with a rifle, was dead. He'd lost out in a game of death with the red headed cow puncher from the Circle K—in a game where second loser didn't count. Or maybe it counted all the way. Whatever the score, Frank Yarren was dead, his body still lying out there in the wet. The sheriff had brought in Ed Harmon's remains, buried them in a grave already prepared in the cemetery, and then discreetly left town to make out some kind of a "report."

He had gone alone. His young deputy had, that afternoon, turned in his badge in disgust.

That worried Kennifer a little. Not too much. If the man opened his head, Davis would take care of him. A meth-

odical man, Lin Davis, Kennifer thought. He'd spent most of the afternoon over at a gunshop, having the triggers on the new guns filed down to the right pull, testing and re-testing for hours until he got them just right—much like the old ones. He'd ridden back to the ranch to change clothes and, Rome Kennifer suspected, with a load of extra cartridges to get the feel of the guns.

Kennifer finished with his toilet and strolled back down town after dark. The streets threw off a wet, dank smell that he loved; just wet enough to settle the dust for a few days. He felt in fine fettle as he entered the Blue Bird.

Tad Brown came in, walking with a new mincing step, carrying a big platter covered with a cloth. He slammed it on the bar with a rattle of knife and fork and scowled.

"I'm through," he snarled at Kennifer. "You hear me—I'm through. I pack that steak all the way up there to that damned little squirt who's still a-settin' in that busted up jail a-grinnin' and smokin' his pipe. He looks at it and says, pokin' it with a fork, 'I was just lookin' for the hair on this bull hide you fried for me. You musta fried it. Queenie never cooked a steak like that,' he says."

"Well, was it that tough?" Kennifer grinned.

"How do I know how tough it was?" exploded the marshal, pouring himself a badly needed drink. "I cooked it just like she—"

"*You* cooked it?"

The marshal downed his drink, wiped his mustache with a sleeve, and glowered. "Queenie left me today, ran away with that hardware drummer. Left a note and says she's tired of fightin' with a man who didn't appreciate her. Says she's goin' to Kansas City and live like a lady and not over any hot stove either."

"Too bad," sympathized Kennifer and watched the marshal mince out.

He strolled on up the street, heading toward the Pritchard's, hoping to get there earlier than the others and have Alma Pritchard more to himself.

OVER in the blown out jail Charley Atlee finished with a final pipe, his supper untouched. He'd deliberately refused to eat the food Brown brought him, not only to bait the marshal but because Mary Ann, coming in among the mesquites, was doing very well by him in the matter of meals. He got up and stretched as she came in, carrying a warm dinner pail.

"Hello, honey," he greeted and kissed his daughter. "All dressed up. Going to the party?"

She nodded. "I didn't want to, what with you in here, Dad. But Miss Pritchard sent over a special invitation by their carriage driver. Said it would be a shame to have a party and the prettiest girl in town not be there."

"She's nice, all right," Charley said, and went to work on the meal. He ate in silence and watched his daughter. Ever since her mother had died many years before the tyke had set to work housekeeping for him just like a grown up. He had watched her go through all the schooling Porterville had to offer, seen her emerge from a gangling kid with long legs and pigtails into a lovely young woman. He worshipped her.

And he knew her every mood.

Something was bothering her.

"Worried, kitten?" he asked, finishing the supper. "If it's about me, I think everything will come out all right. Go on to the party and have a good time."

"All right, Dad, but I—"

"It wouldn't," he cut in softly, "have

anything to do with that red headed cow puncher named Bates, would it, kitten?"

She didn't blush. But he knew in the clear eyes what lay back of him. She hadn't told him about the kiss—nor had she dared mention what had happened in the livery between herself and Mike Kelly before Bates put in. She knew her father too well. He'd have walked right out of that wrecked jail and hunted Kelly up and shot him down on the street.

All Atlee knew was that somebody had beaten Kelly with a pistol. He half suspected who had done it, and intended asking Bates the next time he saw the Circle K man.

"You needn't answer that one, honey," he said to his daughter. "I know. So it's Bates? Sit down, Mary Ann. I want to talk with you. I wouldn't have my little girl hurt for anything in all this world. I'd kill the man who did. But I'm going to tell you about Red. On the surface, Red is a happy-go-lucky cow puncher who kisses all the girls and leaves them."

Her eyes had widened and he suddenly guessed. He covered his discovery by re-lighting his pipe and went on: "But Ed Harmon knew him well up at Austin. They have a big ranch there. They're rich. What he's doing as a rambling tophand for the Circle K is only a guess. My opinion is that home life was too tame and he lit out for awhile to punch cows and sow a few wild oats. Most men do when they're young. I did it myself before I met and married your mother."

"So he's big and rich and . . . educated like—like Miss Pritchard?" asked Mary Ann softly, a little catch in her voice.

"He's more than rich, honey. His father is the new Lieutenant-Governor of the state. I'm telling you this because I wouldn't want my grown up girl to be hurt. I'm telling you this and asking you to feel your way along, if it is Bates."

"Then," she got out in a low voice, "he's not a regular cow puncher. He's not the man who jumped into the office and beat Mike Kelly when he was wrestling—"

It was out, and Charley Atlee was on his feet, his eyes blazing. His pipe had dropped to the floor. "Out with it!" he commanded. "Tell me, Mary Ann! Was that Kelly—was that why he got beat up? Answer me!"

He took her by the shoulders and almost shook her. Brokenly she told him, leaving out nothing.

Atlee bent and got his pipe. He picked up the dinner pail. His face had suddenly grown calm again. "I think," he said in a matter-of-fact voice, "that I'll go down with you to the party tonight. Come along, honey."

CHAPTER XXIII

ALMA PRITCHARD too had spent a busy day, getting the big place ready for the party. All furniture and rugs had been removed from the two huge living rooms, cut by an arched doorway through the hall. There would be plenty of room for dancing. She'd ordered four dozen new lanterns from the hardware store, and they now swung on wires between newly set trees, throwing the huge lawn into a blaze of light. People had begun arriving early, Kennifer among the first, and already a number of men were sampling the whiskey from a big keg mounted on a stand along the east wall of the huge white mansion. Couples were strolling about on the lawn and, inside, the musicians were tuning up.

Her meeting with Kennifer hardly had been one of satisfaction for him,

she knew. She had meant it that way. Encourage him enough the first time, let him come forward, and then pull away. It always had worked with men. All except one. That kiss she would remember for a long time. The second she wouldn't ever forget. She'd been pretty angry about his brashness for the first half mile after leaving him, and then anger had given way to a smile, and by the time she arrived home to relate an account of the day to her father and horrified mother, Alma Pritchard had been laughing joyfully over the whole thing.

She had to admit that this Bates fellow was something out of the ordinary, in more ways than one.

By nine o'clock, when things were in full swing, she had Kennifer well on the way in a game she loved. Several times he'd tried to get her off and each time she had said yes, and then made a trivial excuse to go greet more arriving visitors. She knew he was fuming.

She strolled about the lawn, between being dragged off for dances, and it was sometime about ten that she decided Bates wasn't coming. The thing left her with a sense of disappointment. She had counted on it, planned for it, and gone to quite a lot of extra trouble to fix herself up for him, innerly berating herself for such interest in a mere uncouth sixty dollar a month cow hand.

About then she saw Mary Ann Atlee arriving. With her was her father, and Alma Pritchard immediately left Kennifer, still dogging her heels, to go over. She stuck out a slim hand to them both.

"I'm so glad you came," she greeted them. "I was afraid you wouldn't. And you, Mr. Atlee, how are you? I'm glad you came too."

"It's worth breaking jail to come to a party like this," Atlee smiled. "Biggest thing that's happened in Porterville."

"Thank you," Alma Pritchard said graciously. And to Mary Ann: "Darling, you look lovely! If you'll give me the secret of how you keep that skin and complexion in all this wind and these sandstorms, I'll be your best friend for life."

The girl was beautiful. Her clothes, a plain white dress, were not in a class with the other woman's, but a tinge of envy shot through the Pritchard woman as she realized that Mary Ann Atlee's wholesome beauty far outshone any other woman present, specifically including herself.

"Well," Charley said easily, "I'll leave you ladies to yourselves and go off with the menfolk. Might try a sample of the barrel."

"By all means do," Alma exclaimed. She hadn't noticed the bulge of a pistol beneath his coat, not that he was scanning the crowd for Mike Kelly. Kelly, his face almost unrecognizable, was not present.

"I've been wanting to talk with you ever since I arrived," Alma said,, "but the occasion just never seemed to rise. By the way, I've been hearing exciting things. I was, in fact, mixed up in some of them yesterday. Have you heard anything about that trail herd group out at Gyp Sinks? I was wondering about that man Bates."

"Do you know him?" They were strolling across the lawn.

"Know him!" Alma Pritchard exclaimed, and burst into a low laugh. "That's the most impudent man I ever saw. Do you know that after that fight on Rome Kennifer's ranch yesterday, that man actualy followed me and kissed me."

SHE would never know what the words did to the girl beside her. They went through her heart like a knife. Alma Pritchard didn't know in that moment that she had just shattered

all the dreams and broken the heart of the girl beside her.

"Here, darling, I'll take you inside and leave you with some friends," Alma went on. "I'm the hostess, you know. I'll see you later, dear."

She crossed to the far edge of the lawn to greet some more people just-entering and then she saw the man. He leaned alone against a tree, smoking a cigarette, quiet eyes playing over the crowd, the two heavy pistols low on his hips. She immediately went to him.

"Why, how do you do, Mr. Davis?" she greeted the Kennifer foreman.

He nodded a greeting, said, "Howdy."

"You cant' have any pleasure out here by yourself," she chided him. "Why not come on in and dance?"

He remained immobile, "Not much of a hand at it. Generally leave that to the other boys.

"Would you like a drink?"

"Never touch it, ma'm. Not good business for a foreman."

"Well," she said, turning, "if there's anything I can do to make the evening pleasant for you, I'm sure you'll let me know."

"Thanks, ma'm," he said.

She left him and went straight across the lawn to where her father, cigar and whiskey glass in hand, stood with a group of ranchers and townsmen. She was remembering Kennifer's orders to this man. She knew now why he had come. Cold fear took her in its clutch. Davis expected Red Bates to show up too.

"Pardon me, Dad," she asked in a low voice. "May I speak with you a moment?"

She led him over away from the others. "Dad," she began, low voiced, "that's Lin Davis over there across the lawn, leaning against a tree."

"Davis?" he asked, looking. "Who's he, Alma?"

"Kennifers' foreman."

"Well, invite him over for a drink and to dance. He cant have any pleasure over there alone. There's plenty of girls present."

"Dad, you don't understand," she got out breathlessly. "This man is *Lin Davis!* He's the two gunman who shot that man in town here some time back. Hes' the man Rome Kennifer told out at the bunkhouse yesterday to—"

"Hmm, I see," he said thoughtfully. "That fellow Bates. Well, he hasn't shown up here tonight, has he? I haven't seen him."

"No, but he will. I know it. He'll show up and there'll be a gun fight. Davis will kill him."

"Well, I can't take the guns away from the man," he said impatiently.

"Oh, you're impossible! Go to Kennifer. Make him order that man back to the ranch. If you don't, there's going to be a killing here tonight."

He looked down and patted her shoulder. "Now, now," he soothed, "don't up-set yourself, Alma, in business you make a success on the rule of attending to your own and keeping your nose out of the other fellow's. This affair is none of mine. It's strictly between Kennifer, Davis, and this fellow Bates. I don't mind telling you that I don't like Bates. He talked rather sharply to me in the depot the other night. Almost insinuated that I caused the murder of Ed Harmon, the cattle inspector whose remains the sheriff buried this afternoon. He's an impudent young upstart. He got himself into this mess and he can get himself out."

She looked at him levelly. "You'd better hope," she said quietly, "that he gets out of it in one piece, because there's a fair chance he's going to be in the family. I'm going to marry him."

She left him sputtering and went straight into the house to find Kennifer, but Kennifer didn't happen to be present. He was outside somewhere. A man claimed her for a dance and then another. An hour later she went outside, and then pulled up short.

At the keg, a small whiskey glass in hand, stood Bates! She put down a low cry, saw Mary An Atlee watching him, and started forward. But she never got there. Lin Davis was pushing his way through the crowd.

WORD has a way of getting around when a killing is in the offing, and some of the hangers on around Kennifer's place had found out. It was all over town. And now men split and backed away and one hundred pair of eyes swung in rigid fascination as two men faced each other. Alma scanned the crowd for Kennifer, saw him, but dared not move. She was frozen with fear, and she knew she could never get there in time for Kennifer to prevent it. And she suddenly realized that he wouldn't.

Bates stood with the glass in his left hand, raised rather high, his left side toward the gunman. His right hand held a cigarette which trailed smoke between two fingers. His eyes flicked to Tad Brown, to Kennifer with a grin, back to Davis. Twenty feet separated them.

"Howdy," Bates greeted. "How's things out at the Kennifer *hacienda?*"

"They're all right."

"Good year for beef, they tell me. Yourn pretty fat, or did they run it all off last night?"

"They're getting along."

"Fine," Bates said, sipping a bit out of the full glass and still holding his arm high. He had dropped the cigarette, hand lying close to the unbuttoned front of his shirt. "Maybe I'll be dropping out to look 'em over again."

Lin Davis' voice came low, flat, deadly. "You're dropping, all right, mister, but not the way you think."

Then it happened.

Alma Pritchard, watching the hands of both men in queer fascination, saw the gunman's flash to his hips and for a split moment shocking terror went through her as Bates' own gun still hung at his thigh. His hand flashed beneath his left armpit, beneath the arm still held high, and now double lashes of flame spurted through his shirt with the heavy booming roars of a .45 caliber Colt six shooter. Davis went half backward and then half spun under the impact, something like a sigh going out of him as he fell. One gun clattered to the grass from his limp fingers. The second had not cleared the sheath.

For split seconds not a sound came as Bates pinched out the fire rimmed hole beneath his armpit and then slowly withdrew the hidden six shooter. He looked at Kennifer and a hard grin came to his face as he tossed the gun down on the grass beside the fallen man.

"He can have his gun back now," he said in cold irony.

He walked away and a small piece of yellow, probably jarred loose from his shirt pocket by the concussion from the shots, fell unseen to the ground. Not a man moved as he went. Not a sound was uttered. The crowd stood frozen, all speech lost. Then Tad Brown moved. He jerked out his gun and started to level it at the retreating man's back, but gave a grunt as Charley Atlee, standing close beside him drove the barrel of a six shooter deep into his ribs.

"Go right ahead and try it, Taddie boy," the little liveryman said softly.

Pandemonium broke loose then. In the flurry Alma Pritchard went forward and picked up the telegram. She read it with widening eyse and then went to

her father, standing with a white-faced Rome Kennifer. Kennifer was muttering, half dazedly, "He killed him. He killed Lin Davis—with his *own gun!*"

"Read it," she said to the both of them.

Her father took the crumpled yellow paper, reached into a pocket for his nose glasses, adjusted them and read, with Kennifer looking over his choulder.

> Will check with the Governor on the appointment of Gabe Summers as state brand inspector there. If Harmon was murdered, then something is wrong. Am wiring two Texas Rangers at Ola to ride up and investigate. What are you up to, you young scamp? When are you going to quit that running around and come on home to run the ranch?
>
> Homer Bates, Senior,
> Lt.-Governor.
>
> P.S. Am wiring you fifty instead of a hundred. When will you stop trying to bluff with a deuce in the hole?

"Goddlemighty!" burst out Rome Kennifer, shaken anew. "Bates! I knew that name was familiar. He's the new Lieutenant-Governor. Great God, Pritchard, what are we going to do now?"

Pritchard handed back the telegram to his daughter. "My dear fellow," he said impatiently, removing the glasses and returning them to the breast pocket of the coat. "'We' arent' going to do anything. I'm a packing plant man. I have no connection whatsoever with this fight you have on your hands. If you want to back down now, that's your business. It's out of my hands."

"No," muttered Kennifer savagely, "I won't back down. It will take those rangers a day or so to get here, and I can still clean house and be in the saddle when they arrive. Good night, Alma," he said hurriedly, and left.

He went home, paced the floor for hours, and at four o'clock in the first dark part of the night before dawn heard the first rumble of the oncoming herd. Kennifer broke from his house like a madman, heading for the corral behind it. He hit leather and burned up the road out to get his men, his the actions of a man making a last desperate effort to recoup in the face of disaster.

CHAPTER XXIV

RED BATES went out and mounted his horse after the shooting, a little shaken now that it was over. He'd gone to the party half out of impulse to see Alma Pritchard, half in the hopes of getting in some dancing beneath Rome Kennifer's nose, the more to bait the man. But the appearance of Lin Davis was not unexpected. He knew the man and he knew Kennifer, and since the showdown with Davis had to come, it would be better to have it out when he knew where the man was than to risk a possible shot in the back. That business of the rifle duel with Yarren had left him slightly shaken.

He had seen Davis almost at once from the darkness, still maintaining his position by the tree; had, from the corner of his eye, seen the man when he came toward the house. So now it was over and he breathed a deep sigh of relief as he loped through the night toward the loading pens.

They were empty, the station east of the town, down the track a ways, dark and silent. Bates opened all the gates and set them back against the white fences, his eyes viewing the outlines of the cattle cars on the siding with deep satisfaction. The pens were big enough

to hold the thousand head, and if Buck and the others could get them through, they might yet get the herd into the clear.

Bates finished with the last gate, rode over and tied his horse in between the line of cars and the fence by the chute, took down the dead Yarren's 45-90, and mounted guard. He remained there all night until, around four o'clock or after, he heard the first faint rumble of the herd.

He mounted his horse and loped out to meet them.

The days were long in early September and dawn was greying the land when he arrived. He rode up to Buck, who was at the point, leading the way because he had been to town.

"You're fired!" snapped the foreman angrily. "This is the last straw, Bates. You could have helped us with this herd —Goddlemighty, but we've had our hands full!—but instead you do a sneak on us and slip off in your best clothes to a blowout at the Pritchards'."

"All right, I'm fired," Red Bates said. "I was quitting anyhow when we got the herd through. But I didn't do so badly. It was quite a party."

"Yas?" said the foreman with rising inflection.

"Lin Davis was there too," Bates added.

"Well?" snapped King.

"He ain't there any more, Buck," Bates answered softly and loped on back toward the swing, where Ace was riding with a bandaged shoulder. He left King staring after him.

"Finally got here, huh?" jeered Ace. "Out with high society while we do yore work? Just you wait'll Buck gets a chance at you. He's goin' to rip the hide right off'n your back, Reddie."

Bates told him what had happened and Ace whistled. "So you got him—with his own gun. Good boy, Reddie! That's one less we'll have to scrap it out with."

Pug came by, almost at a run. He caught sight of Bates and pulled up. "Where's Buck?" he shouted.

"Up ahead," Ace said. "What's up?"

"He sent me in ahead to scout the town. I saw a young gent who said he was a deputy up till yesterday. He was prowlin' around town all night. Saw Kennifer hit the breeze for his ranch about an hour ago. I give you fourteen guesses why he went and they'll all be right."

"Hit 'em!" yelled Red Bates at Ace, wheeling. "I'm going back along the line and tell the boys to pour on the leather. It's a race to see if we get to the pens before Kennifer gets here with his hands. Lay it on, Ace!" he yelled again, and went back along the herd at a run.

HE PASSED Big Joe Drusilla, stopped, shouted at him; and Big Joe, with no drag on his hands now, went into action. Bates circled the entire herd, yelling at riders. Whoops and the sound of coiled ropes slapping leather chaps filled the air. The half angry herd broke into a fast trot.

Bates finally completed the circle and came up with King again. The herd was swinging in south of town, cutting over toward the pens to the west, up the track. Full dawn had broken and people were stirring, coming out to see what a herd was doing, coming at a bawling, angry trot almost up against back doors. Bates caught sight of Tad Brown, out back of his house in his underwear. He thumbed his nose and the marshal wheeled and dashed inside.

The leaders hit the pens and tried to mill. Bates and King, with Ace and Pug working together, drove their horses into the swirls of dust, ropes whacking rumps. The big brindle steer

which had caused Mutton Chop so much trouble, and was the leader of the herd, finally found a gate and went through. Others followed and more whoops filled the air.

A hundred head filed in, pushing on through into other corrals, all of whose pen-to-pen gates Red Bates had opened. Pug and Ace broke part of the herd, got them going at another gate, and Bates wheeled back for a run toward the rear of the herd, where Cortez, his remuda forgotten, was working with the Cherokee, forcing the last steers forward. The remuda was mixed in with the steers. Mutton Chop came galloping by in his chuckwagon, canvas billowing out behind, and the rumbling vehicle almost caused a stampede. But in the end it saved the day. The steers broke, poured along the fence, and jumped down just as a line of heavily armed riders hit town from the south.

"Here they come!" Bates called to Buck King. "Under cover, boys! Back of the cars and loading pens. It's a fight!"

He lifted the 45-90, lined the sights on Kennifer, and killed a horse just back of the galloping group. Repeaters began to spang and the group broke for cover, toward the nearest buildings. Riders began to swing down and men, armed with Winchesters, started running on foot.

More rifles began to spang out. A slug struck the wheel of a cattle car and went droning off into the sky with a wheeling scream of mis-shapen lead. Bates, down back of a car wheel, ducked as a bullet tore a long slashing hole in the wood above. A yellow splinter whizzed by. A steer in the corral suddenly let out a bawl and dropped kicking, hit by a stray shot.

Pogie had risked his life to get the gates closed. He ran a hail of bullets on foot, slamming three gates and locking them with poles while the others tried to cover him with protecting fire. He made the last gate, sprinted for the corner—and didn't quite make it. He threw up both hands and went down, rolling over twice and coming to rest, face down in the dust.

"Damn 'em! They got Pogie!" Pug Carson almost screamed and began levering shots at a weatherbeaten shed where a faint drift of smoke showed under the eaves. Bates swung the 45-99 around and drove five big slugs into the same area, and immediately thereafter fire ceased from that point.

Rifles were cracking all over town, it seemed. A distance of about three hundred yards separated the pens from the west end of the street and its first line of buildings and somewhere in among them Kennifer and his men were shooting from cover. The herd in the pens was going wild. A half dozen steers were down, some dead, others kicking and being gored, the smell of blood sending the steers into a frenzy. The huge posts set deep in the dirt heaved and creaked as red hides crashed against them. The fence bulged.

King sent word down the line to get away from the pens. "Work down the track toward the station!" he yelled at Shorty, over near where Pug and Bates lay firing. "Keep to cover of that line of freight cars. Try to get in from the east end of town."

They sent the word along and men began to make dashes, risking their lives to cover a few feet of open space, running clumpingly in high heeled boots.

They fought it out for another hour, the intermittent fire of the repeaters cracking hrough the morning sun. The town was cleared along the main street. Up at the other end a hundred people were gathered around the smashed jail, and once Bates thought he saw Alma Pritchard with her father. He saw Mary

Ann and tried to wave but the girl didn't notice. He scanned the faces as best as he could but could not spot Charley.

DOWN at the other end of the town more people were gathered. That was what was known as the "sporting" part of Porterville, toward which the respectable women of the town never looked except with averted gaze. A riderless horse went galloping up the street and then cut out into the prairie south of town, and a lone she dog, udder heavy with milk, trotted along quite uninterested in what was going on. She stopped and sniffed at a dead man lying half curled up on the porch of a building, his booted feet protruding off onto the ground. Another lay a hundred yards further on, killed by a well placed shot from Ace Sampson's big repeater. In the shed a third sat huddled down in a corner, head sunk far down on his chest, twin trickles of red discoloring the corner of his mouth. Kennifer had lost three men.

And out by the corner of the loading pens the big strapping figure, face down in the dirt, silent, unmoving, told that it hadn't been without price. Like Shorty, Pogie had never told anybody his real name.

Bates made a final sprint and dashed into the depot where Poke McGee stood at a window watching the battle. Poke turned at his entrance.

"Hello, cow punch," he greeted. "How's business?"

"We got two that I know of—maybe three."

"Come over here and you kin git another one," Poke suggested, beckoning with a finger while he looked.

Bates slid over and shifted the freshly loaded repeater into firing position. "Over there," Poke pointed. "Right in back of that corral east of the blacksmith shop."

Bates looked. The man was down in a prone position, working the lever of a Winchester toward the line of railroad cars where some of the Circle K men still were working their way down.

The man was Tad Brown.

"You kin git him dead center," Poke said. "Be a damned good riddance too."

Bates looked again, finally shook his head. "Nope, Poke, I caused him enough trouble. We're square. I won't drill him but I'll make him run faster with that blistered seat than he ever thought he would run."

He adjusted the sights and pulled back the hammer. Brown lay half sideways to him, shooting at a slant in the other direction. The distance was a little over two hundred yards.

"Watch that dried up horse manure he's laying in by the corral," Red Bates said. "It's going to throw a cloud right in his face."

Brown was propped up on his elbows, reloading, his face some eighteen inches off the ground. Bates lined the special sights on a spot four inches below Brown's chin, allowing for the drop of the bullet because the weapon was getting dirty. He fired.

Brown's whole face suddenly became obscured by a cloud of dust that sprang up directly beneath his chin. The slug struck the ground, glanced, and tore a four inch gash in the side of a post two feet beyond him. The 45-90 crashed again and then again. Brown's yell of fright could be heard all the way up the street. He was on his feet, legging it hard in between two buildings. Bates caught a glimpse of his running figure as it flashed toward the Blue Bird and disappeared between it and the now closed Town Cafe. Two minutes later a mounted horseman went spurring down across the flats.

He disappeared into the mesquites a

half mile south of town and Bates turned to Poke.

"I think," he said, "that Porterville has just lost one of its most prominent citizens."

"Why didn't you hit him?" demanded Poke. "Durned if you ain't the durndest feller I ever saw. Had him right in yore sights."

He ducked as a slug drummed in through the window and two more drove splintery holes through the wall. He hit the floor hard and made a scrambling crawl for the opposite door. Bates looked at the wisp of powder smoke in the window and promptly followed suit. The station was not a safe place any more.

He ran out the front door and hit eastward along the track toward the water tower with its concrete platform, Poke McGee hard on his heels. A bullet kicked up dust four feet away and another struck a track rail with a savage spat. They made it and lay there panting, Poke wiping sweat from his bald head. A riderless horse came loping by, reins dragging and Bates risked everything to run out and catch it. He hit the saddle in a bound, heard Ace's yell of congratulation, and then spurred at a circling run, out of good shooting range, to come in from the south and clear the main street.

CHAPTER XXV

OVER in town Rome Kennifer lay hidden in a shed from where he had been working the lever of his Winchester. It gave him free access to the street and several times he had run out to see how things were going with his men using the line of buildings on the north side as cover. What he saw was not very pleasing. Two of his men lay out there, one in the dirt and another half off a porch. Twenty feet from where he had been firing another sat huddled in a corner. It had been Kennifer, lying a few feet away, who had shot Pogie as the big puncher sprinted for the corner of the corral after closing the last gate on the herd. Then a fusillade had ripped into the shed and killed another man who had been firing with him.

Three down and Tad Brown gone. Kennifer had heard the marshal yell as Bates' bullet half blinded him, and something in the marshal's sprint across the street told the owner of the Blue Bird that Tad Brown wouldn't be back. The sight had so enraged him that he jerked his pistol and actually fired a shot at the running marshal.

Four men gone. Nine left; and, as far as he knew, the Circle K men had suffered but one casualty. He ducked out into the street once more and movement down at the east end caught his eye. A horse carrying a familiar red headed figure was clearing the corner of one of the buildings on the south side. Kennifer let go a savage oath at the realization that they were gradually being hemmed in, and the realization was enhanced by a slug from Bates' 45-90 drumming within an inch of his head. He wheeled and dove across the street, his big shoulder taking the locked front door of his saloon with a crash. It gave and Kennifer went inside, looking about him. He started toward the back door and running bootsteps hit the front porch. Two men came in panting, swallowing in great gulps of air.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Kennifer half snarled at them.

"Same thing as you!" snapped still another, crashing in through the front door. They had seen the boss running and were following. "This looks like a wipeout."

Kennifer flung a curse over his shoulder and made for the back door, half

hoping to find a horse out there. He opened it, and promptly slammed it shut again as two slugs drummed in at an angle. Bates had cut over and was covering the rear.

Out by the cars more men were spreading out to encircle the town. King, after sending down orders to go down the tracks toward the east end of town, and thus get away from the pens, had swung to the west and now lay over in Atlee's corral, driving streams of 44-40's down the street at everything that moved. Ace Sampson had made the sporting part of town at the opposite end, and now they swept the street with fire. A man broke from cover and, with dust spurts all around him, sprinted for Kennifer's saloon. The Circle K men saw and began to close in. Only one or two men now were left on the north side. Their fire slowed and finally stopped.

Kennifer and his men were cornered.

Men began running forward toward the line of buildings occupied by Kennifer's men but two hours before. The walls of the Blue Bird began to shudder under the impact of driving slugs. Whiskey bottles leaped off shelves and the new bar mirror followed its predecessor in a shattering slide to the floor. The place was becoming a death house.

KING had by now left Atlee's corral. He ran down the side of the street, ducking into the alleys, pouring in more fire, and quite unaware that Red Bates, over on the other side, was seiving the back door. A beer keg back of the bar inside gave off a booming sound and foam spurted. Powder smoke filled the room as the last of Kennifer's men, now surrounded, fought back. But the windows were soon gone and it was death for a man to raise his head for a shot.

Ace Sampson came trotting down the alley toward where Red Bates lay shoving another shell into the greasy breech of the 45-90. He fell panting, then cursed at the pain in his creased left shoulder. The bandages were showing red again.

"How you fixed for shells?" he panted, wiping his face.

"About forty left. I grabbed all I could carry out of the saddle bags when I let my horse go. Anybody else get hit?"

"Pogie's dead. Shorty got one in the side, don't know how bad. Mutton Chop finally got to his wagon and got some powder and shot. He's been cussing like a freighter because the distance was too great to use that blunderbus of hisn. Listen! There it goes now! Sounds like a bloomin' artillery piece. They boys are closing in. Here—gimme some more cartridges."

"Down't be a hawg. I give you ten already. You can't hit anything with it anyhow. I know—I tried."

"Yah?" jeered Ace triumphantly, frantically shoving shells into the magazine. He levered one into the breech and shifted the gun. "There's one out there in the street says different. Now watch me put a line of them about two feet high above the floor all along that wall. Duck down will they, hah!" He fired, winced at the pain in his left shoulder, and flipped out the smoking shell.

Over across the street the shotgun boomed again. Mutton Chop, down behind a pile of goods boxes in the rear of Bannon's store, was less than sixty yards from the Blue Bird's front, and this time he wasn't using beans. He had a plentiful supply of buckshot. It had been the shotgun's short range blast which had caved in the front windows and then swept the bar clean of men and whiskey bottles.

Twenty minutes later a white cloth

waved from the window, tied on the end of an empty rifle barrel. King, one hundred yards away by the blacksmith shop, saw it and rose to his feet with a shout and a wave. The shout went down the line and presently all firing ceased.

"Come out!" Buck King called in a hard voice that carried a ring in it. "Out with your hands up and we'll drop the first man that moves to break for it."

There was an interval and then the swinging doors, one sagging oddly, pushed outward. A man emerged. He was followed by another. A third crawled out and fell on his face.

The street began to fill with armed punchers carrying rifles. Bates and Ace heard the sounds, shifted position, saw Hank Watson, six shooter held rigidly in front of him, walk boldly across the street toward the Blue Bird. They got up and made for the back door. Bates drove four shots from his six shooter into the lock and then kicked the door inward with a boot. He and Ace stepped inside.

The place was in shambles. Chairs were overturned and the bar was seived. The mirror was gone and along the shelves were nothing but shattered glass. Bodies sprawled along the floor in grotesque positions told the story. Red Bates went from one to the other, shook his head and stepped into the card room.

"Ace," he called through the door. "Come here."

Ace came in, an unbroken bottle of whiskey in one hand, his repeater in the other. "Look," Bates said softly.

KENNIFER sat at the card table, forward in his brawny elbows, the six shooter within inches of his right hand. Red stained the front of his white shirt, and mingled with the red were dark spots. Unmistakeably powder burns.

Rome Kennifer had turned the gun on himself and shot a hole through his chest.

Bootsteps sounded and the rest of the crew came in, a little awed and quiet at the scene of death and wreckage inside the Blue Bird. "Two still missing and unaccounted for," Bates said to King, who was covering the two remaining prisoners. "Mike Kelly and Gabe Summers."

"They probably got away," the foreman said.

Bates nodded, put aside his gun and went out into the alley. He walked down to the horse he'd tied at the lower end of town and mounted, coming back up the street. The street was beginning to fill now with streams of people. Bates rode on toward Charley Atlee's livery; and then he saw Alma Pritchard. She was alone, her father further up the street talking and gesticulating with a number of men. He reined up and looked down at her.

"It was quite a mess," he said simply.

"It was ghastly," she shuddered. "It was horrible."

"Still like Porterville and Texas?"

"Yes," she said calmly, looking up at him out those clear eyes. "Nothing like this will ever happen again here, I'm sure. Law and order will come now. I fully realize that this thing had to happen in one form or another. It's a process of evolution. The law will come."

He nodded. "This will be the last one here. There will still be others elsewhere."

"You're staying?" she asked.

He shook his head. "I'll be leaving in a couple of days on the train, I guess."

She took a crumpled slip of yellow paper from her purse and handed it up to him. "I thought as much. This dropped out of your pocket last night when you killed Lin Davis. So you're

not just—what do you call it?—a rambling top hand after all? That explains the good English you spoke when you forgot yourself."

He tucked the telegram into a shirt pocket. Something like a grin essayed through the tiredness and the dirt visible on his face. "I'll have an awful time explaining this to the old gent when I get home."

She studied his face for a moment. "You could stay here. There's much that. . . . Porterville has to offer, if you'd just look for it."

"I'm going to look for it now, Alma," he answered and lifted the reins.

She turned and glanced back up the street toward the jail, then looked up at him. "I think I understand. I believe she's up there with her father. Good luck. . . . cowboy."

"Good luck," he answered and rode on.

He reined up in back of the jail. Everybody else who had been there had streamed past, down to the scene of the shooting. Only two men remained. Charley Atlee stood smoking his pipe, leaning against the shattered side of the wall as though he hadn't moved in twenty-four hours. Inside sat Gabe Summers, cowed and frightened.

"All over Charley," the puncher said. "All accounted for except Gabe there and Mike Kelly. Seen him?"

"Yes," Charley said simply.

"Where'd he go?"

"I don't know. Same place as the others, I suppose. I've never been there."

"Then he's—"

"I squared up," Charley answered simply.

"What's Gabe doing there?" Bates demanded.

"Gabe," Charley said, still puffing quietly on his pipe, "is swapping places with me. Tell him, Gabe. I think he ought to know."

Gabe raised his frightened face. "I've already told you once," he half whined.

"Ed Harmon was Red's friend. He'd like to hear."

"All right," cried Gabe, his voice high and off key. "I did it. Kennifer said if I'd put Ed out of the way, he'd go to Pritchard and have him get me the job as brand inspector. Said if Pritchard couldn't swing it, he could, and that I'd get a cut on every stolen cow that went up the slaughter chutes. So I followed Harmon out of town and shot him."

BATES let out something that was part grimace and part sigh from his lungs. He shook his head and said nothing. There was silence. Charley went on smoking calmly.

Finally Red Bates said, "Where is she, Charley?"

"Maybe," Charley said, taking his pipe from his mouth, "she doesn't want to see you, Red."

"I want to see her," Red Bates said.

"I wouldn't want her to get hurt."

"She isn't going to get hurt."

Charley Atlee pointed with the wet stem. "I think you'll find her over at the livery," he said, and put the pipe back in his mouth.

Bates lifted the reins and gigged the horse into a lope. He swung to the ground and saw the door slam. A lock clicked from within. He went forward and rattled the knob.

"Mary Ann," he called softly.

"Go away," came her muffled voice, and he could have sworn she was crying.

"Open up—it's Red."

"Go away, I tell you!"

He tried the door again, then backed away. "All right," he called. "I'm going."

He went into the saddle, spurred away at a lope, rounded the corral, and

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'I TALKED WITH GOD'

Dr. Frank B. Robinson

Impossible — you say? No, it is not impossible. You can do the same thing. For there has come to the earth a brilliant, shining revelation of the power of The Spirit of God. It has come because the human race, through the Atomic Bomb — could very easily annihilate itself. So the Spirit of God has spoken and the revelation and the Power that is following, staggers the imagination. In the past 18 years, MORE THAN HALF A MILLION people have told us without our asking them, what happened when they too discovered the actual and literal Power of The Spirit of God, right here on earth, in their own lives.

The future is dangerous. Fear fills most hearts. But may I say to you that there can come into your life, dancing flashes of the Spiritual Power of God? I mean NOW. And when you do find, and know this beautiful Power, whatever problems, trials, fears which may beset you, melt away under the shimmering Power of God. In place of these fears, doubts, and trials, there comes a lovely Peace — a Peace which only God can give —and POWER? — well —the human race knows little of this POWER, which upsets many old conceptions of God, and puts in YOUR hands, and mine, the Power Jesus promised when He said:—"**The things that I do shall ye do also.**"

I want you to know of this Power. I live for no other purpose. For when this dynamic, invisible Power changed my life, my duty was very plain. TELL OTHERS — that's what God said to me, and I've been doing that faithfully for the past 18 years. Write me a simple postcard, or letter, NOW, and ask me for my 6000 word message, which will give you a slight insight into the most soul-stirring revelation from God this world has ever known. Address me as follows: —"DR. FRANK B. ROBINSON, Dept. 47-2, Moscow, Idaho and this message, which is TOTALLY FREE, will be sent by mail immediately. **But write now—ere you forget.** The address again—Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 47-2, Moscow, Idaho.

The Psychiana Religion is, as its name implies, a religious Movement operating under Idaho non-profit religious charter. We are in our 18th year of exclusive operation through the mails. More than half a million people EACH MONTH receive our literature. We operate in our own peculiar way which is different from that of any other religion in America. We plead with every American to allow us to point out this new revelation of the Spirit of God. It is the only revelation which can bring permanent Peace to the human race. It has its inspiration in the Realm of The Spirit of God.

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A THOUSAND HEAD NORTH

(Concluded from page 162)

then ducked into the stable and slipped back. He eased open the inner door. Then he saw her.

She had the front door open and this time she really *was* crying.

She turned as he came in, and this time she didn't back away or move at all. She stood looking at him as he came over. He looked down at her, waited to be sure of what was in her eyes, and then enfolded her in his arms.

"I don't know how you'll like Austin and the ranch, honey," he whispered gently, kissing her several times. "But I'd like you to see it anyhow."

He was still kissing her a few minutes later when horses' hoofs sounded and two men came up. Spur rowels jangled and the doorway darkened.

They wore the badges of Texas Rangers on their chests and carried Winchesters; lean, efficient looking men. One of them he recognized.

"Hello, Merle," Bates grinned. "What in the blazes are you two doing up here?"

"Got a telegram from your father about a ruckus up here. We just passed the jail and a gent over there said you were here. Where's the trouble?"

"Trouble?" Red Bates asked. "Well, there was a good dog fight here last week, but you can't arrest 'em because I think they made up. Then I saw two cats—g'wan! Get the hell outa here, Merle!" he yelled. "Can't you see I'm busy?"

Merle grinned understandingly, nodded to his companion, and discreetly closed the door as he went out.

FAST MAIL SERVICE — THE PONY EXPRESS

★ By MILDRED MURDOCH ★

THOUGH one of the oldest known methods of carrying news, the pony express established between the Missouri River and the Pacific in 1859, encountered difficulties such as have seldom been overcome. However, by dint of hard riding, dispatches were sometimes delivered in Denver in less than three days, and in Sacramento in eight days, from the time of setting out. Stations were established twenty-five miles apart on the open prarie, where fresh animals and riders were kept ready saddled and equipped for the road. Mounted on his hardy little Indian pony, the courier rode with whip and spur to the next station, where, whether by night or day, he stopped only long enough to snatch a mouthful, mount a fresh pony, and secure his letter-pouch behind him. He then dashed on again at the top of his speed. This service, along with the overland stage, helped to bridge the gap of two thousand miles remaining to be closed up in the development of the West, and to make one country rather than two."

PROBLEMS IN MANAGING RIVERS

★ By MILDRED MURDOCH ★

IN BUILDING tunnels under rivers, a problem is to keep the river out of the tunnel as it is being constructed. The tons of water pressure from above have to be balanced by tons of air pressure from within the tunnel. The air pressure has to be just enough and not too much, or the air will blow up through the bed of the river.

During the construction of dams across powerful streams, a great problem is that of managing the river while the dam is being built. Sometimes the water is diverted into a tunnel around the site of the construction work. This gets rid of the stream temporarily, but there remains the difficulty of properly closing the tunnel when the work is done. Another way is to carry the water in a large flume directly across the foundation. The danger of this method is that a sudden flood may break the flume, destroying partially completed work. The difficulties involved are a great tax on the patience and experience of the men responsible.

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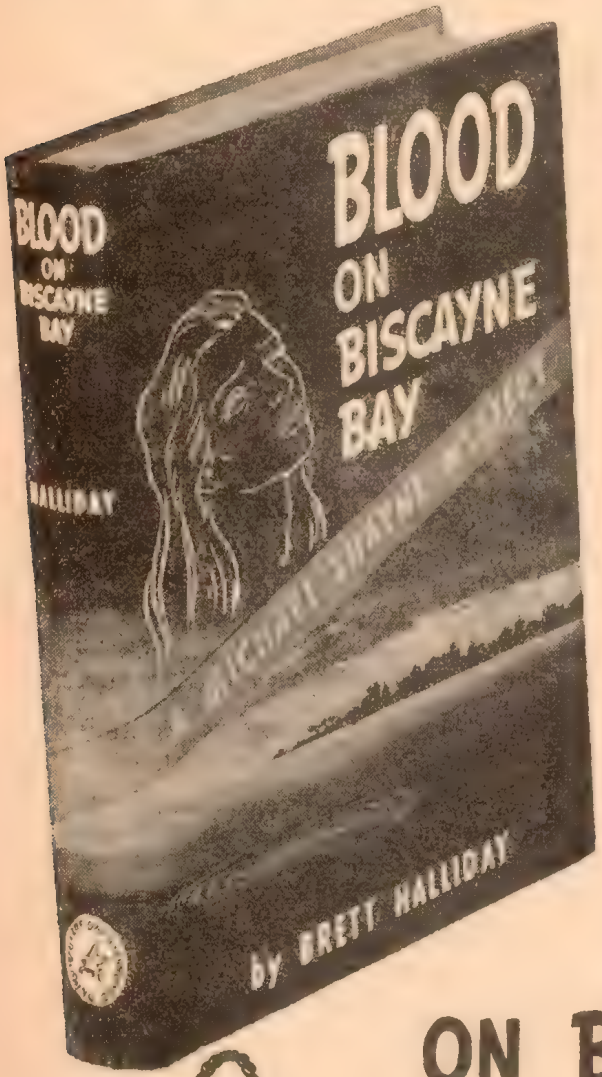

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BLOOD ON BISCAYNE BAY

By BRETT HALLIDAY

A FINGERPRINT MYSTERY FROM

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HE LIKED OUR COVER

Sirs:

You may be, as you say, candid and egotistic in your opinion—I can't vouch for that part, but I am constrained to agree with you that the cover on August *Mammoth Western* is the most appropriate and expressive of anything I have seen for a long time. Yes, I'll make it stronger—and I came to this conclusion before having read your appraisal in the magazine, I have never seen anything come out of the West, so to speak, that told so much about so many human interest things about one dramatic episode of the real West. You may again equal, but you'll never excel in this one. This is a real "Whistler's Mother" in the world of art.

Lt. Benj. S. Burkett
Alamosa, Colorado.

Thanks for them kind words. How do you like the cover on this issue? We pay special attention to our covers because we like to hang 'em on our walls after they go on the magazine. See, we're selfish too!—Ed.

NUTS TO WILD BILL!

Sirs:

Nuts on this Wild Bill Hickok stuff. He never was a member of Jim Lane's Red Legs. Col. Cody never said he was most deadly rifle and revolver shot in the world. Hickok was a braggart, a tinhorn gambler and never gave an opponent an even break. He shot his best friend when that friend happened to touch his shoulder. Hickok turned and fired without looking to see who his victim might be.

His story of the Rock Creek station fight was a deliberate lie. He said Dave McCanlas and a gang of ten other men attacked him at the station; that he killed all of them with knife and revolver, sustaining eleven wounds, "any one of them enough to let the life blood out of a man." Twenty-four hours after that fight he was arrested, taken to Beatrice and arraigned before Justice Coulter. Hickok didn't have a scratch on him.

Instead of an attack by a gang, headed by Dave McCanlas, it was McCanlas and his 12-year old son who stepped inside the station door to inquire why the monthly payment due him had not been paid. The one-room house was partitioned off by a curtain and Hickok hiding behind it shot McCanlas dead. The boy, seeing his father fall dead, started to run, and Hickok, the marvelous rifleshot, fired three times at the fleeing boy—and missed!

How do I know all this. I interviewed the son many years later; interviewed men who had been McCanlas' neighbors and they told me McCanlas never headed a gang, that he was a good neighbor, a kindly family man, always willing to play the fiddle for their frontier dances and usually relied upon to make a speech at their Fourth of July celebrations.

Beside all this I have studied the old and yellowed court records still in the court house in Beatrice, Nebr. Photostatic copies of those records may be found in the Nebraska History Magazine. Jack MacColl killed Hickok in a most cowardly way, just as Hickok had cowardly killed MacColl's brother. Fictionists of the New Buntline stripe are responsible for the great reputation as peace officer and town tamer of William Butler Hickok. All this adulation of wanton killer, congenital liar and tin-horn gambler gives me a feeling of lassitude in the lumbar region.

Will M. Maupin
Clay Center, Nebr.

Well, Mr. Maupin, there you are. And your editor thanks you for your letter. It certainly sounds "right down the line" and we pass it on to our readers for their inspection.—Ed.

A IS FOR ACCURACY!

Sirs:

When one does a thing, anything, well; They generally appreciate being told of it. I just read your December issue and came across the Cattle Country Quiz conducted by Mr. James A. Hines, my compliments to Mr. Hines, he certainly knows his West.

I'm a little better than a 'green hand' at the game myself, as for more years than I care to remember I have been collecting books, pamphlets and other literature on the West and Southwest, especially as it relates to the badmen, gun-fighters, train, bank and stage-coach robbers, and of cowboys, cowmen, rustlers, rangers and etc. People who are in position to pass judgment on such things tell me that my library, collected over a

period of some fifteen or more years, is just about the most complete and authentic as can be found any place in the United States, so when I say Mr. Hines "shor' knows hiz West" you can take it to mean just that. I checked his quiz thoroughly from some of the reading matter that I have, just out of idle curiosity and I'll have to give him an even 100%. More power to him.

Sgt. Charles E. Bell,
2511 Elliott Ave.,
Louisville 11, Ky.

Naturally Mr. Hines will like your comments about him, Mr. Bell, and we're frank to say we like 'em too. Hope you enjoyed the rest of the magazine as well—and there's another quiz by Hines in this issue!—Ed.

ANOTHER ARTICLE DEBUNKED

Sirs:

Strange to me, a mere youth of 83, how some editors of magazines purporting to record history, get things all gummed up. There was one Alexander Blade who wrote a glowing eulogy about Wild Bill Hickok, a cowardly killer, an accomplished liar and a braggart.

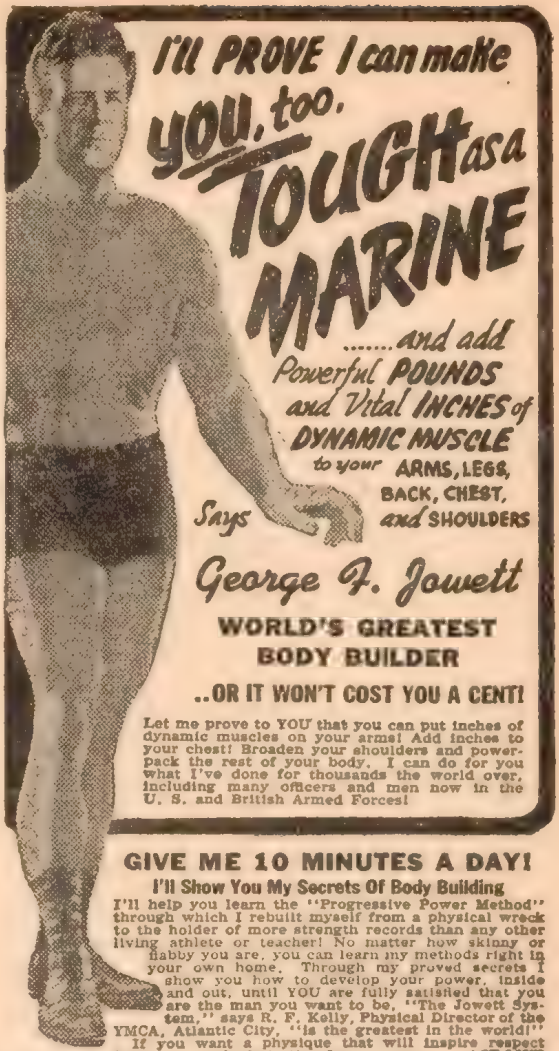
Now comes Gale Stevens in your December issue to ball up history in his story about John Brown. True, Brown was a crazy fanatic and should have been confined in a lunatic asylum instead of hanged. But when Stevens says the Civil War was fought for the cause he believed in, he shows his ignorance of history. John Brown fought for the abolition of slavery, the Civil War was NOT. It was fought solely to preserve the Union. My father answered Lincoln's first call for volunteers, enlisting in a Missouri regiment, and he was a slaveholder. Missouri was a slave state but did not secede. And Missouri will show up high in the matter of soldiers who wore the "Union Blue." Not a half-dozen free states exceeded Missouri in soldiers fighting to preserve the Union, not to free slaves. Slavery was abolished, not because Lincoln was abolitionist, for he was not, but as a war measure, and then abolished only in the seceding states. Slavery was abolished by the thirteenth amendment of the constitution in 1865, after the close of the Civil War and the death of Lincoln.

The Civil War was not fought to free the slaves; it was fought to preserve the Union. Victory for "union forever, one and indivisible" resulted in victory for what John Brown died for.

Please keep your history straight.

Will M. Maupin,
Clay Center, Nebr.

The editors believe Mr. Maupin knows what he is talking about, and we hope he'll continue to come forward with his sizzling letters on the articles written by our writers. It does our editorial heart good to see the boys "slapped down"!—Ed.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TALL TALES OF THE WEST

AS TOLD BY

★ JIM BRIDGER ★

The Baron Munchausen of the West

JAMES BRIDGER, the celebrated hunter, trader, and guide whose name and career are now a part of the pioneer history of the West, was one of those fabulous characters who could blend wonders of nature with sly, slick, imagination. The stories he told, especially about the scientific wonders of Yellowstone Park, have been told many times since his day and have become more enjoyable with each telling.

The first is related to the well-known Obsidian Cliff, a mass of black volcanic glass with which all tourists in the park become familiar. Bridger discovered it on one of his hunting trips in this fashion:

Having been out all day without much luck, Bridger was returning to his camp late one afternoon when he spied a magnificent elk. He took aim and fired. To his great astonishment, the animal did not even move. Bridger quickly raised his gun again and after taking careful aim let go another shot. The elk was immovable. Cursing under his breath, Bridger now went quickly forward, took a position nearer the target, and let go a third shot. The elk still stood straight and unharmed. Bridger, becoming violently angry at what he thought was his faulty marksmanship, leaped forward intending to use the butt of his gun as a club. As he dashed angrily at the elk, he suddenly smashed headlong into an immovable verticle wall which proved to be a mountain of perfectly transparent glass. On the farther side, the elk stood peacefully grazing oblivious to what had occurred. This mountain, moreover, was not only of pure glass, but acted as a perfect telescopic lens, and the elk which was apparently only 75 yards distant was actually 25 miles away.

Then there was the Bridger discovery of an ice-cold stream near the summit of a mountain. It flowed down over a long smooth slope. Because of the friction of the water over the stones, it acquired such a tremendous velocity that it was boiling hot by the time it reached the bottom.

Of course Jim Bridger had his whimsical moments too. For example, to find the height above sea level of any place, he recommended boring down until salt water was reached, and then measure the distance.

It was Bridger's practical nature that produced so many marvelous innovations as far as the application of natural phenomena to everyday life was concerned. Opposite a certain camp site, for example, rose a bald, straight-sided mountain that came in mighty handy to Bridger. The side of this mountain was so far away that it took almost six hours for the echo of a shout or yell to return. To Bridger, this seemed a masterful arrangement for an excellent alarm clock. Each night just as he was going to bed he would call out in his lusty baritone, "It's time to get up now!" Each morning precisely on the hour the echo of the call would roll back and wake the sleeping Bridger to prepare him for the next day's travel.

Then there is the famous story that probably belongs to Emerson Hough but was somehow acquired by Bridger. It is concerned with the strange characteristics of Alum Creek, a tributary of the Yellowstone. According to Bridger, this peculiar creek came to his attention one day when he had ridden across it to some distance on the other side and then returned. He noted that the trip back was a great deal shorter than the trip out. Moreover, his horse's hoofs seemed to have shrunk to mere points and the poor animal was having extreme difficulty moving about for his feet were digging into the ground. Seeking a cause for this trouble, he examined the creek and found the astringent quality of the alum had the power to pucker distance itself.

This last yarn will undoubtedly call to mind certain experiences that many tourists have had at Yellowstone Lake. It is a common practice for fishermen who catch fish in the lake to cook them in the boiling pools without removing them from the line. Well, nearby there is an immense boiling spring that sends its overflow spilling into the lake. Since the specific gravity of this boiling water is somewhat less than that of the lake water because of the expansive action of heat, it floats upon the colder water underneath in a layer three or four feet deep. It is to this spot that Bridger would come when in a fish-eating mood. Dropping his line through the hot upper layer, he would let the bait fall to the cooler fish-laden water and, having hooked his victim, cooked him on the way out.

There was an editor in 1879 who was prepared to publish the stories of the Yellowstone wonders until a man who claimed to know Bridger told him he would be laughed out of town if he printed any of "old Jim Bridger's lies." In later years this editor publicly apologized to Bridger for having doubted his statements. We apologize too!

Carter T. Wainwright

FATE AND THE BUFFALO

By
ALEXANDER BLADE

THE history of the western Indian is linked tightly to the history of a solitary animal. The strength that he showed in beating back the white man in the early days, and the weakness later, left him prostrate and completely dependent on the bounty of his paleface enemy, came from this singular mangy brute of the western plains—the buffalo.

More than the horse to the Arab, the camel to the Arabian nomad, the reindeer to the Laplander, the seal to the Eskimo, or the elephant to the Hindu, the buffalo filled such a large place in the life of the Indian people that life itself was impossible without it.

Almost every part of the beast's body was vitally important to the Indian's existence. The lodge of the Indian, his bed and covering, his clothes, his weapons of war, his shield in battle, kettles for his food, boats for crossing the river, material for his saddle and halter, strings for his bow and arrow, hair for ornamenting his dress, every bone from the strong horns to the hoofs, and finally the meat itself—these were the staples provided for by the buffalo.

The hunt of the buffalo was obviously a most important art to the Indian. Days and weeks were devoted to preparation with the most rigid laws against individual hunting for frightening of the herds—with even more rigid attention paid to

(Concluded on page 171)

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Vignettes OF FAMOUS WESTERNERS

By CHARLES REEVES

WILLIAM S. WILLIAMS — Circuit-Riding Preacher

THE names of Kit Carson, Jeb Smith, Bridger and other famous trappers and hunters are familiar to us as heroic men of the Old West. These men searched for Fur as far and dangerously as any men who have searched for Gold. Kit Carson and others have magical names, but the name of the man who taught them the most of what they knew has almost been forgotten. This man's name was William S. Williams, better known throughout the West as "Old Bill" Williams. Perhaps we should not say that his name has almost been forgotten, as both Williams Mountain and the town of Williams, Arizona, have been named in honor of the gallant old Indian Fighter. From what we can piece together, Old Bill was quite a fellow. It seems that he started out as a scout in the Indian campaigns in Ohio. All of a sudden Old Bill got religion and turned out to be a Methodist preacher circuit riding in Missouri. He went to the Osage Indians with the avowed intention of converting them to Christianity. He even went so far as to translate the Bible into their language. All was going well, Bill was living close among the heathens spreading the Gospel when all of a sudden something happened. Old Bill found out that the Indians had converted him from Christianity to their way of thinking. This came as quite a shock to Bill's hunter friends as he started to try and talk them into not shooting any more Deer or Elk. It seems that the Osage believed that when a person dies, his soul goes into one of these wild animals and Bill didn't want to take any chances that he'd be shot at. He left the Osage after a time, purchased a horse and complete trapping outfit and headed West. He went around by himself for quite awhile, trapping and making a living as best he could. Some time during his wanderings he joined with a band of Utes and stayed with them for many months. He was quite a fearless hunter, and gradually he was asked to sit in with the elders in order to make decisions. Eventually, so the story goes, they recognized Old Bill as Chief, made him a medicine man and gave him two wives. Things were working out fine until the day the Utes asked Williams to lead them in an attack on the Whites. Bill thought he should have time to think this over, so he made an excuse and slipped away to a nearby fort. Here, after a few days, and much whiskey, Old Bill decided to stay with his own people. The Utes learned that he had told the whites their plans and decreed that he should be killed as soon as they could catch him.

Old Bill knew the West as well or better than any other person. One of his guiding experiences is about the time he led John C. Fremont on one of his mountain explorations. Almost all of the party was lost, but it was not Bill's fault. He had warned Fremont that it was almost sure death to try to cross the mountains in the winter, but Fremont disregarded his advice and went ahead anyway. Rather than leave Fremont without a guide at this point, Williams tried to do his best. Just as he thought, they got caught by the terrible snows and a large number of the party were frozen to death before they fought their way into Taos.

Old Bill was one of the rugged old independent Westerners. He would not trap for any fur company, he worked by himself and for himself. There are many stories as to how he met his end. Some say that the Utes finally caught up with him; others, that he was found frozen to death in the mountains. Whatever his end, Old Bill Williams was a leader in that brave band of men that have contributed to the glorious heritage of the West.

COMING IN THE BIG APRIL ISSUE

"A MAN'S GAME"

By BERKELEY LIVINGSTON

AT YOUR NEWSSTAND — ON SALE FEBRUARY 6

(Concluded from page 169)

the religious rites to keep the Evil Spirit from the hunt.

There were many methods of hunting this important beast. The direct onslaught method was that by which a group, in careful order, would ride directly upon the herd until the beast scented the danger and then, breaking into a curious gallop, each hunter would go his own way shooting the animals as they rushed to escape. The "still" hunting method, often adopted by the American sportsman, was to steal unobtrusively on the leeward up to the edge of a buffalo herd. Then utilizing the best concealment available, the hunter would begin to fire on the animals. The buffalo, never alarmed at the crash of a rifle so long as he saw neither smoke nor hunter, would stand idly by as his companions fell. Perhaps they might even gather round the wounded animal and try to make it rise or even lick its wounds. Only a change in direction of the wind or the uncovering of the hunter would make them flee.

The Indian, however, killed the animal only for his needs and wisely took steps to see that the herds would never be depleted. It was the paleface who wantonly destroyed the animals to satisfy the demands of the fur market in the East. It was estimated that they were wiped out at the rate of a quarter of a million a year. To this number add the slaughter by the "sportsmen" of the middle nineteenth century and we can understand how a single generation sufficed to exterminate a species that would normally require ages of geological history.

It was this policy of the wholesale destruction of the buffalo that, as much as anything else, caused the bloody Indian Wars. The Indians understood all too clearly that the extermination of the buffalo was the beginning of the end of the Indian race. It came about exactly as they suspected, for when the buffalo was gone the Indian was defeated, and westward expansion moved ahead.

This was undoubtedly one of the most important reasons why the great Indian tribes feared so much the coming of the white man and fought so hard to stop him. The bloody Indian wars that cost so many lives were, to a great extent, caused by the Indian's determination to protect this vital food supply.

LAKE IN THE SKY

By ROBERT N. ROBERTS

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referred to as "The Lake of the Sky." It is so called because when one suddenly and for the first time sees this body of water it appears to him as if he is looking up into the sky: the color of the water matches, in fact excels, the beauty of a blue sky on a clear spring day.

In 1844, Fremont, that renowned American pioneer, set eyes on this magnificent body of water. He was the first white man to do so. He named the water "Lake Bonpland." Although many of the names given by Fremont to various lakes and rivers have remained to this day, the name Lake Bonpland soon was discarded.

In the territory of Lake Tahoe there lived many Indians in whose midst there grew up, as always does among the Indians, a host of tales and interesting legends concerning the lake and the surrounding territory, some of which are related in the following paragraphs.

Long ago there lived in Nevada a good Indian who, in spite of his goodness, was incessantly bothered by an Evil Spirit. After due consideration, he decided to leave his home and travel to California, thereby freeing himself from the Evil Spirit. But, unfortunately for him, every time he attempted to escape, the Evil Spirit would thwart his plans in one way or another. Finally the Good Spirit came to the stricken Indian's aid and gave him a particular bunch of leaves which possessed magical qualities. The Indian was to start his sojourn and if he saw the Evil Spirit approaching, he was to drop a leaf and water would immediately spring up where the leaf fell. Since the Evil One could not go across water, it would have to go around; thus, the Indian would be able to outrun the Evil Spirit.

So the Indian started off and after he had traveled a while he cast a glance backward and sure enough the Evil One was approaching with terrifying rapidity. The Indian, in his excitement, dropped almost the whole bunch of leaves. However, to the Indian's relief, a huge body of water soon began to rise and, in a short time, Lake Tahoe lay between him and the Evil Spirit. Then the Indian continued on his journey reassured of a successful escape. After a while, however, he turned around and saw the Evil One approaching again. The Indian immediately began to run with amazing speed and dropped the remaining few leaves and small lakes and rivers came up to protect him from his enemy. Thus at last the Indian arrived safely in the California valley. This is the way the Indians of the Lake Tahoe region believe the lake came into existence.

An intriguing tale also arose over a wild-grub pit in the Lake Tahoe region. It goes as follows: Once there was an old Indian who lived with his two grand-daughters. He was a somewhat mean man and forced the sisters to work hard all day so that he might eat and sleep. Pretty soon the two sisters became disgruntled with this sort of economic system and decided to run away. One night their chance came, so they fled away into the

darkness of night until they were utterly and thoroughly exhausted. Whereupon the two girls fell on the ground and, looking up into the sky, wished that they were living up in the Heavens with a Starman for a husband. Eventually, the Indian girls fell asleep. The next morning, upon awakening, they were startled, yet delighted, to find themselves up in the sky. They also discovered that the elder sister already had a star-baby. At first the sisters liked the baby. But, since he cried continuously, they threw him aside and refused to console him. So the baby, angered and filled with the lust for revenge, went to find his great-grandfather the Moon. While the baby was gone, the sisters became somewhat tired of living in the sky and longed for life on the earth. Suddenly the Moon came to avenge the mistreatment of his grandson. He picked the two sisters and shook them so hard that the very skies thundered and roared. Then he threw the sisters down to the earth where they fell upon their grandfather, who was carrying many bags of acorn and flour, with so much force that they made a huge hole in the ground. To this day the Indians relate this tale and, so they say, find plenty of wild acorn and wheat in this pit which was caused by the downward plunge of the dissatisfied sisters.

It is interesting to note how the Indians look upon Nature and how they relate all of Nature's mysteries to the human being. The two legends cited above are indicative of this fact.

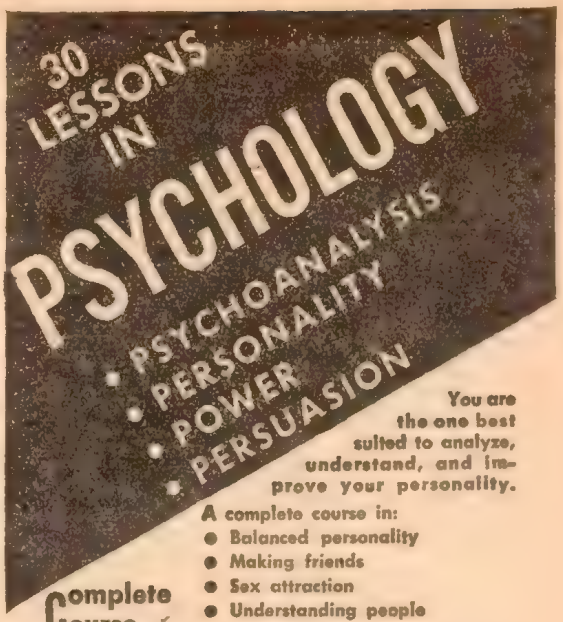
INDIANS CAN TAKE IT!

By L. P. CALDWELL

ARE there differences between the races in withstanding pain? One scientist wanted to know if Indians can "take" it better than white men can. He chose several subjects from each group and applied a stylus to the skin, increasing the pressure until the subject admitted pain. He found that, as a group, the Indians absorbed more pressure than the whites before indicating that it was hurting them.

Do these results show that the Indian has the natural trait of fortitude? Are Indians born with such a pain-enduring personality? Or are Indians trained to be so?

Scientific observation has shown that within the Indian culture, as contrasted to the white man's culture, lies the answer. The Indian, from the cradle to his death, is taught to tolerate pain. His first experience might have been the great pressure felt by being tightly bound to a cradle board. If he comes from a tribe whose ideal is a certain shape of skull, he is made to carry heavy weights on his head. During childhood, the Indian boy is not sheltered from stark reality He hears



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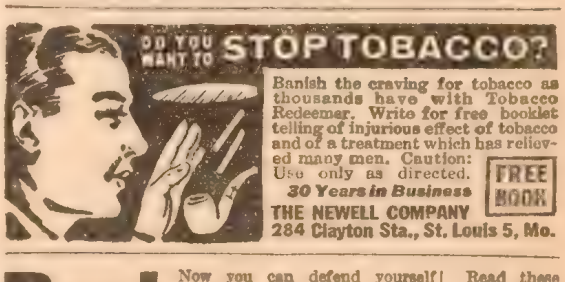
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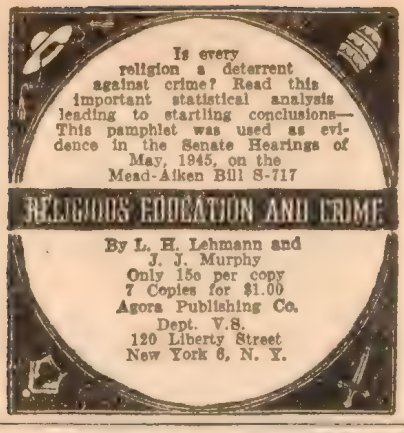
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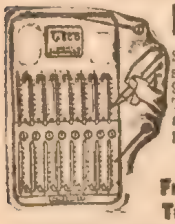

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countless stories of the exploits of brave men, of harrowing experiences, of warriors, bloodshed, and death. Life soon assumes a grimness, a sacrificing attitude quite rare in the fairy-tale existence of white-men's children. Later, the Indian youth has to undergo the trying ceremonies accompanying adolescence. He is subject to as many trials as is necessary to establish him in the minds of the tribe's elders as a man—and a man who can assume the responsibilities and withstand the hardships of a difficult life. It goes without saying that pain is introduced early in the Indians' life as a powerful instructor!

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Society and personality, then, are closely related. It is not difficult to understand now why the product of a primitive culture shows more physical courage than the product of modern culture. Such traits are not inborn. Pain has been adopted by the Indian kindergarten as the most influential teacher.

INDIANS NAMED THESE STATES

By C. P. REINHOLD

THE state of Illinois is named from a tribe of Indians called the Illini who inhabited most of the state in the 17th century when Father Jacques Marquette, the French missionary, entered the territory. The word Michigan is an Indian one which is said by many people, who are well versed in Indian lore, to mean "big lake" or "great lake." Minnesota also is an Indian word which means "muddy water" or "cloudy water." The word Iowa was formerly the title given to a tribe of Indians by a different tribe who inhabited the region which is now the state of Iowa. The word, Iowa, means "drowsy ones" or "sleepy ones." However, at first a river was named Iowa and later the state was named after the river. The name Wisconsin is derived from a Sauk Indian word which has reference to birds' nests in the banks of a stream. Marquette first gave a stream the name, "Mish-kau-sing."

After several revisions the word Wisconsin was adopted. The word Wyoming is a derivation of the Delaware Indian word "maughwau-wa-ma" which means "extensive meadows" or "huge plains." This name was first used in the East

but was later carried over and applied to the territory now known as the state of Wyoming. Also, Nebraska is a Sioux Indian word which means "broad water" or "shallow water." It is believed that at first this name was applied to the Platte River by the Indians and then the white explorers designated the whole surrounding territory as Nebraska.

INDIAN ASTRONOMY

By PETE BOGG

ACCORDING to an old Indian legend, the sun, the moon, and the stars all are members of one related family of stellar bodies. The sun is thought of as being the chief and supreme ruler of the heavens. The moon is the wife of the sun and the stars are their children. According to the Indians, the sun arises every morning in the east and makes his way across the sky in an effort to catch some of his children so that he can eat them and keep alive.

But the stars are too fast for their father, the sun, and run out of sight as the sun arises. When the sun is tired of chasing his children, he slowly makes his way into his hole in the west. He enters this hole and crawls along till he reaches the center of the earth, where he finds his narrow bed and goes to sleep. The bed is supposed to be so narrow and the hole leading to the center of the earth so small, that when the sun awakes the following morning he cannot turn himself around and must creep out of his eastern entrance.

The moon is a very devoted Mother and when the sun has caught some of her precious children and consumed them, she mourns and carries on something awful. At the first of every month, she always covers her face with black to show her mourning. The sorrow, however, soon wears off, and at the end of the month the mother moon is again her happy self as she makes her way among her dancing children with a smiling face.

RINGO: Tombstone Terror

(Continued from page 119)

you goin' around town trying to pick a shootin' scrap with folks. I'll have t' ask you for yore guns." He turned to Deputy Breakenridge. "Take care of 'em, Billy." He walked out.

Sadly, Ringo handed over his beloved ivory-gripped Colts. "Might as well commit suicide," he commented gloomily. "The minute I get outside that door without my equalizers, the whole town will come after me."

The deputy nodded. "Too bad, John," he agreed, "but orders are orders." He laid the six-shooters in an open drawer. "Well, I have to step

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out for a minute. You know, you can go any time you want to." Not bothering to close the drawer, he left the room. When he returned a few minutes later, the outlaw was gone—and so were the Colts.

NOT many days later, Sheriff Behan called his deputy. "Billy," he said, "I've got a warrant here for John Ringo. Seems he held up a poker game over in the outlaw country while he was drunk. I guess it was just his idea of a joke, and he returned the cash when he got sobered up, but some sorehead put in a complaint. Your job is to serve the warrant."

Breakenridge whistled. "That's a sweet job! All I have to do is go into the toughest territory in Arizona, arrest the fastest gunman in the section, an' persuade him to come to jail with me!"

But when the deputy located Ringo—who, not knowing of the warrant, was not hiding out—the outlaw readily agreed to come in.

"Have to take care of some things first, though," he explained. "You go on ahead, Billy, and I'll catch up with you later."

And, so good was Ringo's word in Arizona, the deputy agreed! Furthermore, the rustler kept his promise and was with Breakenridge when that officer reached Tombstone. There he arranged for security for bail. Sheriff Behan, feeling that the security was more than ample, released the outlaw at once, without waiting for official approval of the bond. "After all," he pointed out, "the approval is just a technicality."

Out of jail again, Ringo headed straight for Charleston, back in the outlaw country, to warn his friend, Curly Bill, that the Earps were coming to arrest the latter for robbing a stagecoach.

Meanwhile, Wyatt Earp heard of his enemy's arrest. "Fine," he confided to his men. "With Ringo in jail, we'll catch Curly Bill sure." To make doubly certain, however, he arranged with the district attorney that no bail should be granted the rustler for at least 24 hours.

The next morning Sheriff Behan learned, to his horror, of the district attorney's refusal to approve the bond. Tomorrow morning the missing outlaw must be brought into court. If he wasn't there, it was grounds for all kinds of charges against the sheriff! Behan and Breakenridge tore their hair.

"Lord only knows where Ringo is by now," the deputy groaned.

Behan glared. "Well, if he isn't here by mornin', I got a hunch I'll ride right out o' office on this business," he growled.

While the officers were worrying themselves sick, the rustler was having some more of his own peculiar brand of fun with the Earps. Doc Holliday and Wyatt and Virgil were the trio who had decided to seize Curly Bill. Now they rode toward the bridge into Charleston.

"At least," Wyatt chuckled as they jogged along, "we don't have to worry about John Ringo takin' cards in this game." His companions laughed

agreement. And then, eyes bulging with amazement, they stopped short.

At the far end of the bridge, big as life and twice as handsome, stood a tall, lean individual, a Winchester rifle across his arm: John Ringo!

"Were you gentlemen looking for someone?" he inquired politely.

The three drew off for a conference. They weren't looking for anyone, they decided; not with Ringo at the other end of that bridge, instead of safely in jail back in Tombstone.

"Come back soon, friends," the outlaw mocked as they rode away. "Charleston's always glad to welcome strangers."

Later that afternoon the capture of two other lawmen revealed to the outlaws of Charleston that Sheriff Behan and Breakenridge were due for trouble if Ringo wasn't back in Tombstone by the time court opened the next morning. Without hesitation the rustler leader swung into his saddle.

"Billy Breakenridge gave me a break on my guns when I needed it," he declared, "and I wouldn't have been here to warn Curly Bill if Johnny Behan hadn't gone out on a limb to approve my bond. I'm heading back for Tombstone!"

WHEN Judge Stillwell opened court the next morning, the Earp forces were there in a body to enjoy Sheriff Behan's discomfiture over not being able to produce his prisoner.

"The court is now ready to consider the fixing of bail in the case of the People of Arizona versus John Ringo," Judge Stillwell declared. "Bring in the prisoner."

The sheriff kept his face straight with an effort. He nodded to Deputy Breakenridge. The deputy opened the door. Proudly erect, in stalked Ringo, eyes flashing. Again the tables were turned on the Earps! When the time for the rustler's trial came, no one appeared to press charges against him.

Despite all the efforts of Wyatt Earp and his friends to get rid of Ringo, the outlaw outlasted them in Tombstone. It was not until late July, 1882, four months after the brothers and Doc Holliday had departed, that he cashed in his chips.

Drunk with whiskey and disgusted with the life he had come to lead, he rode out of Tombstone. What happened on that trip no one will ever know. Some say he was killed, others that he committed suicide, a thing he had frequently threatened to do. Be that as it may, he was found dead against an oak tree in a canyon a few miles from town. A single bullet had struck him in the temple, and one of his Colts had been fired once. He was 38 years old.

Outlaw and killer though he was, he stood out as a man who never broke his word; never let a friend down. Fearless and deadly, he ranks close to the top in any list of the west's ace gun-fighters, if for no other reason than that he faced down Wyatt Earp.

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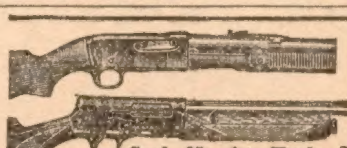

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